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**HOMILY - 20 February 2020**

James 2: 1-9 - Mark 8: 27-33

**Who do you say I am?**

Is Jesus having an identity crisis? Is he feeling insecure? Does it matter to him what we think? He is only too aware that there are many who are talking negatively about him. He is a ‘drunkard’, a ‘glutton’, and eats and drinks with sinners, (*Lk 7:33-34; Mt. 11:18-19)* Along with these accusations he is charged with being illegitimate(Jn.8:41) and is possessed of evil spirits (Mt. 12:22-32; Lk.11:14-23.)It is clear that Jesus disturbs some of his listeners, threatens their worldview and what he proclaims as good news is interpreted as bad news by them!

***Who do you say I am?***

This question is not addressed to the general public, it is addressed to his close, intimate followers and friends, his disciples. We, who are called to follow him more closely, are also being addressed personally: *Who do you say I am?* I cannot answer the question for you, I can only answer it for myself. And yet, the answer to that question will determine how we live our lives. I wonder how Don Bosco answered that question? Who was Jesus for him?

It is easy to focus on Don Bosco’s mission to the young which is clearly a sharing in the mission of the Good Shepherd. However, to answer the question who is Jesus for him requires the ability to look into his heart. I came across an interesting perspective in the *Book of All Saints*, by Adrienne Von Speyr (mystic and friend of Von Balthasar). She writes:

It is not very easy for Don Bosco to lead his fellow workers into the world of his prayer… If his helpers pray too little and take more joy in the action, in the undertakings, in the work, or in the outer shell than they do in God, then he becomes sad, and at the same time, is at a loss about what to do. He does not know how to convey his own enthusiasm to them.

To be honest, I can certainly relate to that! I remember confessing to a friend of mine that there are times when it’s a case of ‘anything but prayer!’ Occasionally I will find ways to keep myself busy, to distract myself, to entertain myself – to help others, to do good – so long as I don’t have to stop and face the restlessness, the boredom, the loneliness or whatever is going on deep inside. But if I have learnt anything from the Lord in prayer, I have learnt this fundamental truth, I cannot meet him if I don’t first face the truth about myself.

In John’s Gospel Jesus talks at one level and is understood at another level. He is often misunderstood. I am no different because when it comes to Jesus, I often get it wrong. I am always learning. And so, like his disciples, amongst my favourite expressions to describe Jesus is teacher. When Jesus says “no-one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (Jn.3:3) or “unless you become like a little child you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt.18: 3) he is speaking a fundamental truth. Not only is it an invitation to trust like a child, but it also expresses a deeper reality. We cannot see Jesus without the light of the Spirit and that same light is the Spirit of truth. Our resistance to the Spirit, to his light and truth, can often be traced back to childhood where we have learnt to look at life in a certain way.

This became very evident to me personally during a thirty-day retreat which I did a number of years ago. Most of the retreat I spent in dialogue with Jesus who brought me back to my childhood and helped me to re-live memories with him being present where I thought he was absent. I discovered my default position from childhood was that I had withdrawn in order to protect myself. It is difficult even for God to get close if we are protecting ourselves against him! These defences had now become obstacles because what once protected me as a child had now become a way of keeping God at a distance.

Over two and a half years ago I became provincial, and at the end of the first year I went on my annual directed retreat. The retreat began with the invitation of Jesus knocking at the door to be let in. It spoke to a deep desire in my heart, but as the days passed I was becoming increasingly frustrated. At one point I laughed to myself thinking, what if I can’t let Jesus in because I’m the one who is not at home! The rest of the retreat was taken up with facing the truth of those words. My initial reaction to the truth was one of deflation. During the retreat, as I said earlier this morning, I was struck by the contrast between a dog rushing ahead, pulling his owner behind him and a flock of seagulls allowing themselves to be carried by the breeze. For most of the year as provincial I had been the dog, and unlike the seagulls, I had failed to allow myself to be carried and this had contributed to me being outside. I had been caught up in activity, trying to make things happen, trying to fulfil the expectations of others, but busyness is no guarantee that we’re doing God’s will. When I had slowed down enough to check in with what was going on I was overwhelmed by feelings: I felt isolated, unsupported, overwhelmed with responsibility, absorbed by the workload, drained of energy, staggering under the weight of expectations and I wondered to myself: How did I get here? In short, I felt deflated. Experience has taught me that deflation is often God’s point of entry, my defences are down and at last he can reach me.

Cast the nets into the deep was the piece of scripture I prayed with, but even here my expectations were getting in the way. I was expecting a great catch and nothing was happening fast. I returned to the text for a second period of prayer and having cast the nets from the boat into the sea, I lay down in the boat next to the Lord. I could feel tightness in my chest and he gently asked me – “speak to me about it!” My instinctive reaction was not again, I’ve spent the whole retreat checking in with my feelings and I’m getting fed up with it, fed up with analysing. I simply said, ‘Lord, I miss you.’ But it was his answer that caught me off guard. ‘I miss you too!’ I was surprised. The more I pondered his words the deeper they seemed to burrow into my heart. I suddenly began to realize something else, I had deprived him of my company, that he missed being with me, that our friendship meant he also looked forward to me coming to him in prayer, and I had been neglectful. Not only is he my teacher, but he is also my friend – You Lord are mine and I am yours (Sg.2:16 ). The fact that he missed me wasn’t in my script, but it was in his script. He surpassed my expectations. I renewed my covenant with him to spend more time in daily prayer. I used to think that in prayer I am being called to wait on the Lord, but as I discovered last August in my directed retreat, God is already waiting on me! How can you wait on someone who is already there? I am the one who is distant and absent, he is always present. “Therefore will the Lord wait, that He may be gracious unto you… Blessed are they who wait for him.” (Isa.30:18). Just as he washed the feet of the disciples, I have discovered that in prayer, and especially in Eucharistic adoration, he makes himself our servant as he waits upon us with graciousness, patience and love.

The experience of missing God and being missed by God re-ignited an earlier encounter with the Lord during my thirty-day retreat eight years earlier. Towards the end of that retreat, I found myself meditating on John ch.21. I was on the beach gathered around a fire with the apostles and Jesus eating and talking. Gradually there was only me and the Lord seated opposite each other in conversation with the fire keeping us warm. He encouraged me to focus on the fire and understand it as the fire of his love. There were no words, just intimacy, a contentment to be in each other’s presence. It was later that I fully understood the significance of this experience when my spiritual director repeated my own words back to me: *so* *there is fire between you?* If my default position in childhood was to protect myself and keep God at a distance, Jesus was teaching me a new way of coming to the Father through intimacy with him. I have re-visited that fire with the Lord many times. Even when I’m angry or frustrated, I respond to his invitation to place it as a log on the fire of his love between us so that as it ascends to Our Father it will return as a blessing on the person I’m angry or frustrated with.

***Who do you say I am?***

Again and again I find that there is a difference between my ideas about Jesus and the real Jesus whom I encounter in prayer. He always surprises me. He opens the eyes of my heart so that I can see differently, look beyond, understand even more. Even when I’m disappointed in myself because of some failure or sin, I find that his voice does not join in my self-condemnation. He makes me face the truth, but at the same time moves my heart to sorrow. By accepting me in my weakness I experience first-hand his mercy. He always offers me hope. You think I would learn from my mistakes but I find I often repeat the same ones. So many things can keep me at a distance from him: my busyness, my worries, my sins, my distractions, my compensations. And yet, without ever giving up on me, he pursues me relentlessly. When I find myself in a place of unfreedom because of choices that I have made, that do not include him, he tracks me down. He is constantly “seeking me” and “saving when I get lost” (Lk.19:9) because I have set my heart momentarily on something other than him. My freedom matters to him. And so as well as being teacher and friend, I experience him as my Lord and Saviour who heals, forgives and sets me free.

It has become clearer to me that I don’t trust God enough and that, if you like, that is my original sin. That explains why at times I’m tempted to try to make things happen rather than rely on him. I’m thoroughly convinced that the reason why he has me in my current position as provincial is because he is asking me to surrender to him, to learn to trust him more. I find myself in impossible situations again and again, and he is asking me to trust, to surrender. You think I would have learnt the lesson by this stage, but each call to surrender is to take another step in trust. ***Who do you say I am?*** becomes an invitation to accept him not only as teacher and friend but as Lord. Will I truly follow him by allowing him to lead the way? Will I rely on his power, remembering that “without me you can do nothing”(Jn.15:5) but also “my strength is at best in your weakness”(2Cor.12:9)? In the many situations where I come face to face with my own human limitations or situations that are beyond my control, I am being invited to trust in him. To truly trust and believe that “the hand of the Lord is never shortened” (Isa.59:1). However, to take the path of surrender and abandonment is not easy, because who among us likes to be out of control? God gives us a parachute – he says jump – do we trust him? We will never know unless we jump. The only way of finding out if the parachute will hold our weight is by taking that leap of faith into the void. We must jump first, it is only later that we feel carried. But, we will never jump if we don’t know that the Lord can be trusted, that he will be there to catch us and carry us.

***Who Do You Say I Am?***

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