39A Homily for the Twenty-first Sunday of the Ordinary Time Year A

A homily by Fr Lawrence Lew

Albert Schweitzer in his quest for the ‘true’ historical Jesus once said: “Each successive epoch found its own thought in Jesus, which was, indeed, the only way in which it could make him live”. For, through the centuries, each age of history has “created him in accordance with one’s own character”. The generations tend to project onto Jesus its ideas and ideals. And it might seem that Jesus today invites us to create a subjective image of him according to the needs and fashions of our times. For he says: “Who do you say I am?”

However, Simon Peter’s response, in contrast to the conjecture of his contemporaries, makes it clear that this question requires an answer founded in objective truth, in the reality of who Jesus is – an answer founded on the certitude of revelation. Hence Jesus says: “You are a blessed man because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven”. Thus, Peter does not rely on a subjective feeling, or a psychological projection, or a desired ideal to give substance to who Jesus is. Rather, he stands on the rock of God’s word, and thus his faith is firmly established on a revelation of divine truth from the Father that is confirmed by Jesus. This revelation concerning Jesus’ identity is not subject to the vicissitudes of history, nor does it suffer fluidity according to our human feelings and desires. For truth is eternal, thus “the Word of the Lord endures for ever” (1 Pt 1:25).

Hence, the question concerning who we say Jesus is invites each of us to discover this revealed truth, to deepen our faith in the Jesus disclosed by Scripture and Tradition, and to rejoice in the truth that has been entrusted to the Church. As St Thomas Aquinas says: “the providence of Divine Mercy instructs us to hold by faith even those truths that the human reason is able to investigate. In this way, all men would easily be able to have a share in the knowledge of God, and this without uncertainty and error.”

In today’s Gospel, then, two certain truths about the person of Christ are revealed to St Peter. Firstly, Jesus is the Christ, and secondly, he is the Son of the Living God. To say that Jesus is the Christ is to say that he is the long-expected one foretold by Seers and Prophets. As such, Jesus cannot himself be a prophet, nor can he be surpassed since no one else in history has been pre-announced nor predicted to come as he was. But what was predicted and expected of him, the Christ? Both Jews and Gentiles longed for a deliverer or redeemer. Peter thus acclaims that this is the One. But since Truth is universal, Christ is not just deliverer of a particular people, nor the redeemer restricted to a limited time. Rather, he is the universal Saviour, the Answer to the deepest questions and longings of the human heart. Hence to you and me today, wherever we may be, he asks the same question of us: “Who do you say I am?”

From what does Jesus deliver humanity? This question is answered by the second part of Peter’s revelation. Jesus is Son of the Living God, that is, the God of the Resurrection. So, he delivers humanity from their mortality and decay, from the eternal death that human nature, being perishable and changeable, is naturally subject. Hence Jesus says later on in the Gospel, “God is not God of the dead, but of the living” (Mt 22:32b). So, Peter learns that Jesus is the Son, who shares in the nature of the living God, and who thus has the power to raise us from the dead (cf Jn 11:25) so as to share his resurrection glory. This revelation leads to Christ’s declaration that “the gates of the underworld” would not prevail against the Church. For all who are baptised into Christ, and who are united to him as members of his mystical Body, would ultimately not succumb to the assaults of death. Rather, the final Word belongs to Christ, the Son of the Living God, who lives and reigns. Thus, each successive epoch and every human person who loves life must seek the true person of Jesus Christ. For it is not, as Schweitzer imagines, we who make him live through our thoughts, but it is the truth of who Jesus is revealed to be that makes us live.

Consequently, no matter what happens to us now in this life; no matter what terrors and uncertainties assail us in our lifetime; no matter what mortal pains and illnesses we might suffer and endure in the transience of this present world, the eternal truth of who Jesus is stands firm. We stand on the bedrock of that which is revealed to Peter and vindicated by the Resurrection: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. When asked by anyone "Who do you say that he is?", let this be our answer both in word and in action.