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Septuagesima

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BUT WHOM SAY YE THAT I AM?

Jesus asked this question of his disciples. The multitudes had thought that he was perhaps John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, a kind of reincarnation of a great holy figure, a prophet, that would spell doom for the occupying forces of the Roman Emperor. But Peter knew differently. The Father had shown him that Jesus was in fact the Christ, the Son of the living God.

If we are to answer this question for ourselves, it must be in faith, revealed by our heavenly Father, and not by any turn of the human imagination. But it must be faith, not abstractly held, but held firmly in the person of Jesus Christ. Faith's origin may be in heaven, but its place is directed toward the man Jesus, a man who is as other men are.

It is here that we have, in faith, our only hope. The early Fathers knew as much when they said that what the person of the Eternal Word "did not assume he did not save." They meant that the Son of God had to take all of human nature to himself and not just a part of it.

There has never been anything in the history of the Church more hopeful than this. Jesus was and is a man. And while we profess that he is also fully divine, we cannot understand this reality as any thing less than complete and true humanity. As the author of Hebrews put it, Jesus was in all ways tempted like we are, and was yet without sin. He learned obedience through suffering, and so became the captain of our salvation. Because he has lived a human life, and has suffered with us, he is able to comfort us now in all the changes and chances of this mortal life. Nothing is more comforting to us than the truth of Jesus as a man.

And so in faith we are ready to seek him whose kingdom is our home. And we seek in hope. Hope believes that all our desires and needs and wishes as

human beings are and shall be realized in Christ. And as we find him in faith and hope, we are made ready to follow him in love, what St. Paul called charity.

Apart from charity we are nothing at all. St. Paul is absolutely clear about this. We may have all faith, and know all mysteries and even give "our bodies to be burned" but if we do not have charity, we amount to nothing more than wasted space and time. It is love that

knows the Good and moves with determination to possess it. If we find in Jesus all that we desire and need and wish for, we cannot help but love him. And if we love him, we cannot help but follow him.

As we enter into Pre-Lent, the wondrous setting in the Prayer Book of the three Sundays before Lent, (now abandoned by contemporary liturgists), we take up these virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

On Septuagesima, we will hear again the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, and how they grumbled against the Goodman of the vineyard. He does what is good with his own. He is merciful to grant to every laborer a share in his goodness. Such goodness does not ultimately depend upon their labor; it is of God and not of man. And so we are encouraged to put our faith in the goodness of God.

On Sexagesima, we will hear again the parable of the sower and the seed, and how the seed of the Word of God, which falls on the good ground, brings forth fruit with patience. It is patience, which is the key, and patience, in order to be patient, requires hope. We have good hope in the in the seed of the Word because it is true, and comes forth from God to make us new creatures.

And on Quinquagesima, we shall hear of Jesus going up to Jerusalem, where he will be put to death and rise again. He himself is the very incarnation and embodiment of charity which "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things." He will bear love, with Shakespeare, "to the edge of doom." Now, that we may follow him, we too shall need the gift of charity.

There is nothing in the Christian Year more wondrous than these three Sundays. They teach us all we need to know if we are to answer the question, "Whom do ye say that I am?"

In the midst of the 21st century, with cell phones and satellite radio and the internet, all at our fingertips to find whatever thing it is we wish for, still, the most important things are what are truly human, that which we can believe, and hope for, and love.

Man does not change in the essence of his heart. And even though our heart is marred by sin, what we want at the end of the day is to believe what is true, to abide in the hope that we may possess what we now know in part, and most of all to be joined in love to all that is Good.

Simply put, what is really human, and what lives by faith, with hope, and in love - most truly - is Jesus Christ. He is what Dostoyevsky called, "the most beautiful man that ever lived." Whom do we say that he is? With Peter we profess him to be the Christ, the Son of the living God, who is in reality also a man, and thereby, our sweet Savior.

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