

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Words are important. Words have meaning. They convey a message; a thought; a feeling; a perspective; a point of view. So, when we use words we should do so carefully and thoughtfully, with great clarity. We have seen in recent events what happens when words are used imprecisely.

For instance, no English dictionary has been able to adequately explain the difference between the words COMPLETE and FINISHED. In a recent linguistic competition held in London and attended by some of the greatest experts in the field, virtually all of the linguists said there is simply no difference between COMPLETE and FINISHED. A young Guyanese man, Mr. Samdar Balgobin, begged to differ. With this astute answer, he received a standing ovation that lasted over five minutes. Mr. Balgobin offered this example: “When you marry the right woman, you are COMPLETE. When you marry the wrong woman, you are FINISHED. And when the right one catches you with the wrong one, you are COMPLETELY FINISHED!!!” With this answer the young man won a trip around the world and a case of scotch.

When we read the Word of God, we need to do so with a certain level of precision which allows us to understand what God is saying to us. For instance our Gospel account today from St. Matthew places this encounter between Jesus and his disciples in Caesarea Philippi. In his account St. Luke omits this detail, which St. Matthew picked up on from St. Mark’s Gospel. Why was this location of Caesarea Philippi so important to Matthew and Mark?

It was a Greek colony in northern Galilee popular with the Greco-Roman settlers of Palestine because it was heavily wooded with fresh springs that fed a small lake—a vacation spot of sorts. Near the lake was a shrine to Pan, the Greek god of the wild, of fertility, and of the reversal of ill fortune. The Panion provided a refreshing place to rest for travelers on the busy highway nearby. Jesus and his disciples apparently paused there and probably watched people carrying their prayers and offerings to this god. It was in this setting that Jesus decided to test the faith of his disciples.

Isn’t it interesting that Jesus didn’t ask them, “What do people think of me? Or think of my message? Or think about my miraculous works? No! He asks them, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

That’s the way Jesus always refers to himself—the Son of Man. It describes Jesus’ self-concept as a man who ate and drank and laughed and cried with others, who would suffer immensely, and to whom God promised a glorious future. By referring to himself as Son of Man he kind of is giving his disciples a hint of how he sees himself.

But now he asks them, “Who do people say that I am?” In today’s parlance it’s as if he is asking them what the pollsters are saying about him. So they tell him, “Herod and his crowd think that you’re John the Baptist who has come back to life; others are saying you’re Elijah; still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Can’t you see the amusement on Jesus’ face when he’s told that all of the people somehow see him as a dead man walking.

Finally, he says, “Okay, Guys, who do you say that I am?” What a loaded question! Think about it! How would you answer that question if Jesus put it to you—“Who do you say that I am”? Sometimes, I think, children have a better grasp of great spiritual realities than we adults. A ten-year-old boy when asked, “Who is Jesus?” thought about it for a second and replied, “Jesus is the best picture God ever had taken”. Not the greatest theologian—not St. Thomas Aquinas, not St. Catherine of Siena, not St. Augustine, not even Martin Luther—could give a better, more precise answer to the question—“Jesus is the best picture God ever had taken”.

This is the question with which Jesus challenges the faith of his disciples—“Who do you say that I am?” While all the others are stammering and looking at their feet planted on the ground, the never-in-doubt, always-ready-to-give-off Peter pipes up for all of them, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Peter is on safe ground saying that Jesus is the Christ, which simply means the Anointed One. The term was often used to refer to a Hebrew king or priest or prophet or even a foreigner like Cyrus the Persian king who allowed the Jews to return to Judea from Babylon. But when Peter adds, “...the Son of the living God”, Jesus knows that only God could have revealed that to him. He knows that His heavenly Father has chosen Peter to be the Rock upon whom He would build his Church.

Why did God choose Peter? He was not the strongest or most reliable of the disciples. Rather the Gospels show him to be a boastful man who folds in a crisis, is slow to learn and so weak that he denies he even knows Jesus on the night he is arrested. But God knows that Peter can only preach God’s reconciling love if he first experiences it himself. It is because Peter will fail so completely and weep so bitterly over his denial of Jesus that, when he is finally reconciled with Jesus at the Sea of Tiberius, he will truly understand God’s message of mercy.

In that heart-rending scene, Jesus will walk Peter back through his denials by asking him three times, “Simon, Son of John, do you love me?” To be the Rock on which the church is founded, Peter must first experience the breaking open of his proud heart, like the rock Moses struck in the desert to yield water. Peter’s tears were his baptism of mercy. It is because of his suffering that he was able to proclaim God’s unconditional love to sinners. He was a sinner saved by that love. This is the real drama in this story. Peter has primacy

because he is first in failure, first in suffering, first in his need for God's mercy, first in giving himself completely in service to Christ and His Church.

This is the point of today's Gospel. This is the call that comes to all of us. "Be merciful, for God has shown you mercy". Perhaps the greatest obstacle to showing mercy is that too few of us feel we need it.

This is the first step in true conversion to Christ—to accept the grace to know yourself deeply enough to acknowledge your sinfulness and need for God's forgiveness and love. The second step is to acknowledge who Jesus is to you. If, as the youngster affirms that Jesus is the best picture God ever had taken He becomes the model of who you and I are to become as people made in the image and likeness of God. Jesus is quite simply the ultimate role model for humanity.

Matthew ends this encounter between Jesus and his disciples with Jesus strictly ordering them "to tell no one that he was the Christ". Why? I believe because he first had to show them what it meant to be the Christ—to suffer and die for the sake of sinners and rise to show that sin and death have no power over him, and through him, no power over us.

Now, here's the problem. The greatest obstacle to true conversion to Christ by being merciful is that few of us feel that we have any need for mercy. We are so prideful of our self-sufficiency, our accomplishments, and our possessions that we have no need for mercy from God. Why, therefore, should we be merciful? We delude ourselves into believing that all that we are and all that we have accomplished and have come to possess is our own doing. If others can't keep up with us, well shame on them.

If such is our attitude, Jesus can never be a role model for us. He may be a folk hero. He may be a wonder-worker of sorts. He may be someone who provides us with an ethical framework for our lives. But he will never be the Messiah, our Savior, the Christ, the Son of the living God since as self-sufficient, accomplished, independent individuals we have no need for God's mercy.

Such people could never model their lives on the compassionate, self-sacrificing, already-forgiving-love for all people that Jesus embodies.

If we are unable to acknowledge our sinfulness and need for God's forgiveness and love, especially in our relationships with others in our human family—seeing every man as our brother and every woman as our sister in need of our compassionate, self-sacrificing, already-forgiving love--we will miss the very meaning of the Gospel and the joy of sharing it with others.

As Jesus challenged the disciples at Caesarea Philippi, so he challenges us at this time, in this place. Who is Christ to you...and what difference has it made in your life?