

DEACON JOHN HALL'S HOMILY

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 23, 2020

Edward Fitzgerald served as the second bishop of the Diocese of Little Rock from 1866 to 1907. During his tenure as bishop, he attended the First Vatican Council in Rome in 1870. During the Council, the question of papal infallibility was introduced. Although it finally passed, there were only two bishops who voted against papal infallibility. And of course, one was Bishop Fitzgerald of Little Rock. Some have called this standoff the big rock vs Little Rock. And the big rock won!

Jesus gives his graduation speech in today's gospel as he plans to begin his fateful journey to Jerusalem, and he prepares his disciples for a time when he will not be physically with them. So he questions them. But why in the region of Caesarea Philippi, this non-Jewish area, about 25 miles north of the sea of Galilee, was formerly known as Paneas or Pinias – named for the Greek God Pan . . . an area with a long history of Greek gods and idol worshipping. After Paneas came under Roman control Herod built the Temple of Augustus Caesar in 16bc. Just a few years later it was massively enlarged with white marble by Herod's son, Philip the Tetrarch, and dedicated to Tiberius Caesar – and changed the name Paneas to Caesarea Philippi, in honor of Caesar and himself. Any visitor to that region even from a distance could not help but seeing that huge glistening white marble structure without thinking of Roman authority and the gods of the netherworld.

Yet it was here, of all places, that Jesus wanted to ask his disciples, “Who do **you** say that I am?” And Peter gets it right! “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Yes, the same Peter who in next week's gospel argues with Jesus and is rebuked: ‘get behind me Satan.’ The same Peter who falls asleep when he is supposed to be praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. The same Peter who will three times deny knowing Jesus. But in the end, after the death of Jesus, it is a scared Peter, who will be filled with the Spirit, who refocuses and re-centers his life and becomes what Jesus asked him to be: a rock, part of the foundation of the church . . . trusted with the keys to the kingdom.

In the midst of this Covid-19 pandemic, polarizing politics, it is a time when people haven't been to their churches, when it's been too long since receiving the Eucharist, and too long since we've gathered as a worshipping community of believers in God.

Jesus is asking you and I: “Who do you say that I am?” We are probably like the disciples as they stood in the shadows of the false gods in Caesarea Philippi . . . “Jesus, are you sure you want me to ask me that now?”

Yes! This is the time for us to answer Jesus’ question: “Who do you say that I am?” At this time when we are most unsure about the future, that we should find God as the true focus and center of our lives.

We’ve all suffered the effects of Covid-19 just as we have all suffered the loss of a loved one or a serious illness or maybe a divorce. During such trying times we might discover that the center or focus of our lives was not where we thought it was. We may find that our center, our focus, was something other than God. Perhaps our focus was an addiction, selfishness or some other unhealthy vice.

Re-centering our lives is not easy, because it means we must first let go of something we thought we couldn’t live without. Then we have to learn to re-arrange our lives so our true focus is on Christ, the Son of the living God.

Just as Jesus gave Peter the keys to the kingdom surrounded by the false idols of Caesarea Philippi, we have been given those same keys in the midst of a pandemic. You and I are the rock on which our church continues to be built. We will continue to establish the kingdom of God in our communities, wherever we are . . . regardless of any distractions.

Yes, today, Jesus asks you and I: Who do you say that I am?