

12th Sunday C, Sisters of Charity Federation, Basilica of the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

I. Introduction: Who Do You Say That I Am?

A. Dear sisters and dear friends: Years ago, as a seminarian on the Mount that corresponds to this Valley, I was taking a final examination in the Christology course, a course that dealt with the identity and saving mission of Jesus. Among the many things that exam include questions about the titles of Jesus in the New Testament - titles such as - “Messiah”, “Son of God”, “Son of Man”, “Servant,” “Lord” ... to name a few. It will go unrecorded in this homily how well or poorly I did on that exam but suffice to say that, in the words of Maurice Chevalier, “I remember it well!” And let me also observe that getting the answer right does not make one a disciple.

B. I was reminded of that Christology exam of old while reflecting on the Gospel reading from St. Luke just proclaimed. As it opens, we find Jesus absorbed in prayer to his heavenly Father in preparation for what was a turning-point in his relationship with his disciples, that point where they begin to come to terms with who Jesus really was. In this crucial moment, Jesus gives the disciples an exam of his own “Who do the crowds say that I am?” he asks, and the disciples relate to Jesus the prevailing opinions. People thought Jesus was John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets. Jesus proceeds then to put the disciples themselves on the spot by asking in effect, “What about you? Who do you say that I am?” Enlightened by God the Father, Peter spoke up and answered for the others: “The Christ of God,” that is to

say, God's anointed, the long-awaited Messiah.

II. Taking Up Our Cross

A. Peter answered correctly but did not fully understand his answer, for he still thought of the Messiah as one who would free Israel from the Romans. That is why today's Gospel tells us that Jesus "rebuked" Peter and the others. In spite of all they had seen and heard, they didn't yet understand. In reality, Peter would understand the meaning of Jesus' Messiahship only after he witnessed the Lord's suffering and death on the Cross and only after Peter himself suffered for the sake of the Gospel, even to the point of laying down his own life. What Peter had yet to learn was in fact predicted centuries before in the prophecy of Zephaniah (found in our first reading): "They shall look on look on him whom they have pierced ..." and ... "they shall mourn for him as one mourns for an only son."

B. And the same is true for us. We will understand and accept Jesus as our Messiah and follow in his footsteps to the extent that we share in his sufferings: "If anyone wishes to come after me," Jesus says, "he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me." These are words we have often heard and have committed to memory. In fact, however, it is a difficult thing to "deny" oneself, a difficult thing not to love life, not to try to hang on to it, or to use the language of Pope Francis, to go beyond our "comfort zone". We may correctly understand who Jesus is and what he did to save us - but it will not register in our minds and hearts and it will not really mean much for our daily lives unless and until we share in what he suffered for the salvation of the world.

C. So, what really does it mean to "deny" oneself? Does it mean that we put on a long face? Or feign humility by denying the gifts that God has given us? Does it mean that we engage in destructive forms of self-loathing? Heaven help us, denying oneself means nothing of the sort! Rather, it means we have come to believe what

Saint Paul teaches us today in Galatians: “Through faith, [we] are children of God in Christ Jesus.” Faith is like the doors of a church that open us out onto a heavenly world, a world of supreme trust and unimaginable love. Over and above any other human distinction, St. Paul tells us, we are loved with an immeasurably generous love by God the Father. And that love, poured in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, should engender in us the trust we need to pick up our Cross and to follow the One who is the Messiah, the Christ of God. It takes that kind of trust really to believe that we will gain our lives by losing them. It takes a lot of trust and a lot of love to face the confrontation Jesus wants to provoke in the heart of each one of us between our love of life and our fear of dying on the one hand and his invitation to us to sacrifice our lives as he sacrificed his own on the other. What you and I need to understand is that the Gospel does not skim the surface of life but rather “reaches into the center of human life, to the love of self that is natural to all of us” (Cf. Servais Pinckaers, *The Spirituality of Martyrdom*, p. 118).

D. It is in this light that we can understand and more deeply appreciate the constant emphasis of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton on the will of God: “The first end I propose for our daily work is to do the will of God; secondly, to do it in the manner that he wills it; and thirdly to do it because it is his will.” She stressed doing the will of God not out a slavish sense of obedience but rather out of the deepest confidence in the Providence of God that sought her out and called her at the most difficult moments of her life, and called her to ever higher forms of love, indeed to a “deepening charity for the life of the world”. She could answer her calling only on the same basis that we can answer our calling: unshakeable faith that we are loved by God for our own sake and that we are indeed children of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

III. Overflowing Charity

A. When we allow the true nature of Jesus' Messiahship to register in our hearts and take the Lord at his word in picking up our cross on a daily basis, we in turn become sources of an ever deeper and more beautiful charity that overflows onto a world that needs God's mercy so desperately. Surely this is what drove St. Vincent de Paul to his life of charity and this is what motivated St. Elizabeth Ann Seton to found a religious family that would serve the very real needs of people with the unbounded charity of the crucified Messiah. From her ardent charity sprang the inspiration, the charism, of your communities and from that same charity sprang works of healthcare, social services, education, care for the newly arrived, and care for our common home - works that are your hallmark, works that manifest the credibility of the Gospel.

B. So as you look to the conclusion of your gathering here in Emmitsburg, let me say how happy I am that you are here and that I hope you will return early and often. Let me also say what a joy it is to celebrate the Eucharist with and for you, for the Eucharist is the endlessly renewable point of contact between ourselves and the Crucified Savior, the venue where we are renewed as sons and daughters of God, as also the source and summit of our charity, 'an ever deepened charity for the life of the world.' Through the prayers of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, may we truly open our hearts each day to Jesus, the Messiah of God, and find the courage to deny ourselves, to pick up our cross each day, and follow in his footsteps.

C. And may God bless us and keep us always in his love!