

A passenger entered a plane and went to his seat in first class. He found that someone was already sitting there. When questioned, the seated passenger told the man that he had a ticket for that seat which he showed him. Sure enough, the seated man was assigned to 2B. When the first man looked at his ticket, he noted that he was assigned to a seat in coach – 29E – a middle seat, no less. More than irate, he went to the flight attendant and demanded a seat in first class. She calmly informed the man that first class was already full. The man became even more angry. He screamed at the flight attendant saying, “do you know who I am?” The flight attendant motioned for the man to wait a second, went to the airplane microphone, and calmly made this announcement to everyone already on the plane, “is anyone able to help this man? He doesn’t seem to know who he is!”

All of us have had an encounter with another that was tense or confrontational. Perhaps that encounter was very different from how the other person previously acted in your experience. At that moment, maybe you thought or exclaimed, “well, you think you know someone until something like this happens!”

In Jesus’ time, people would often ask others around them what they thought of them. The answer helped to define that person. In our day and age, we attempt to be our own man or woman despite what others think of us. But in Jesus’ day it was important to hear from others about who they thought you were.

In today's gospel, Jesus' disciples come up with several descriptions of who they thought he was, "some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." That answer indicates the incredible regard and respect that the people had for Jesus. Jesus speaks like a prophet, but not just any prophet. He is linked with the greatest of prophets – Elijah. He is like John the Baptist who led thousands to a baptism of repentance. Those around Jesus see him as someone unlike anyone else. He was extraordinary. Jesus is also the real deal. He doesn't just talk the talk. Jesus walks the walk. St. Peter adds another layer to all this when he exclaims, "you are the Christ, the Son of the living God." St. Peter was declaring that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. He was the one anointed by the Father to save the world. That's what the word "Christ" actually means – "anointed one." He was the one set aside by the Father and commissioned to do incredible things.

St. Peter correctly answered Jesus' question. And Jesus commended him for that. While St. Peter knew the right answer, his actions often were utterly opposed to what he professed. In the verses which follow this gospel, Jesus informs the disciples that he will suffer, die, and be buried. St. Peter seems to think that he needs to save Jesus from such a fate, but Jesus chastises him and corrects his misconceptions about the role of the Messiah.

As time goes on, St. Peter seems to continually get it wrong about Jesus – when Jesus washes his feet; when Peter denies Jesus while he is being interrogated by Herod and Pilate; when

Peter runs away from Jesus and hides while he hangs upon the cross.

There is a famous story – probably apocryphal – told about St. Peter after Jesus had died and risen from the dead. Peter was ministering in Rome during the time of the Emperor Nero who mercilessly persecuted Christians. Since he had a good indication that he would be crucified like Christ for preaching about the Messiah and sharing the Good News, Peter hightailed it out of Rome to save himself. Walking along the Appian Way, he came across a person whom he eventually understood to be Jesus. Peter asked Jesus, “Quo vadis, Domine?” “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus told him, “I am going to Rome to be crucified again.”

At that moment St. Peter understood that he needed to go back to Rome and face his own destiny. Filled with courage, St. Peter turned around and walked toward Rome. On a hill outside the city, St. Peter was crucified. The Basilica of St. Peter sits near the spot where St. Peter was crucified and his bones rest in a reliquary just below the main altar of that church.

Today’s gospel teaches us two things. First, while we are called to know ABOUT Jesus – that is, have some head knowledge regarding who Jesus is - as human, as divine, and as revealed by scripture – it is more important that we have a relationship WITH Jesus. While knowledge of Christ is good, our relationship with him is what enables us to walk in his footsteps into the Kingdom of God.

Second, coming to know Jesus is a life-long endeavor. Often, when we think we know Christ or are at peace with what we think we know of Christ, he challenges our head-knowledge and shakes us from the faith that seems comfortable and secure. Since Jesus is divine, we will never completely know or understand him. Our minds will never fully grasp who he is. But in his compassion and mercy, Christ continues to reveal himself to us. Furthermore, the way of Christ isn't a matter of keeping certain rules and laws alone. While they are important, Jesus reveals that the way we show we know him is how we love others. We show how we truly know Christ in the way we sacrifice ourselves for others. We show how we know Christ in those moments when we willingly share in his suffering, especially in those moments where others seek to undermine, dismantle, or water down the faith we profess in Christ.

In the first reading and the gospel which were proclaimed today, we heard references to "keys." As we know, keys provide an opening – to our homes, our businesses, our cars, and our possessions which we hold dear. Jesus offered a figurative key to St. Peter. Jesus gave St. Peter a sign of his position of authority among the other disciples. Through his ministry St. Peter provided a key, an opening, a way to the Father and to the Kingdom of God.

Being oh-so-generous, Jesus offers to each of us the keys to the Father and to his Kingdom. What unlocks that door and allows us to enter the Kingdom is not WHAT we know about Jesus. Rather, it is WHO we proclaim Jesus to be. We proclaim our understanding of who Jesus is BY HOW WE ACT. Acting like Christ is the sure sign that we have a relationship with him.

Learning how to act like Christ will take our entire lives. We see that reflected in St. Peter's life. Even though he took a few wrong turns, even though St. Peter lost his way at times, even though he had to make some U-turns while on his spiritual journey, St. Peter started over again and again, constantly seeking to re-align himself with the person of Jesus. And Jesus graciously raised up St. Peter every time he attempted to re-start his relationship with the Lord.

St. Peter shares that key with us – the key which opens up the Kingdom of God to each of us. That key is uniting ourselves over and over again with Christ – even when we falter in faith, even when our ego blinds us from seeing the face of Christ in others, even when we are afraid and seek to hold on to things that aren't of God. God is there. God waits for us. God gives us what we need. We just have to believe again and again that Christ is the key which allows us to enter his Kingdom and experience all that the Kingdom offers when we seek him above all else.