21st Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A – August 27, 2017

“Preachers and Catchers”

Isaiah 22:19-23
Psalm 138:1-2, 2-3, 6, 8
Romans 11:33-36
Matthew 16:13-20

In late 1975 my dad took a job as the general manager of a distribution center for the Ingersoll-Rand company’s Proto hand-tool division which moved us from Wisconsin to Westerville. Safety was one of his biggest priorities and the company sponsored all sorts of trips and outings for employees and their families for spotless safety records. As a result, in the spring-summer of 1980 when 11 years old, I had the opportunity along with several other children of employees to go to a Cincinnati Reds game at Riverfront stadium which was preceded by a special breakfast at a fancy downtown hotel. I was not much of a baseball fan at that time in my life and having only been in Ohio a few years knew next to nothing about the Cincinnati Reds let alone the Big Red Machine. Mid-way through the breakfast there was a commotion near the entrance to the room. I looked over and saw this rather tall, tanned and athletic looking adult standing in the doorway. Everyone else in the room left their eggs and sausages and pancakes and went clamoring over to him. I was still hungry, so I took a few more bites and then went over to see what all the fuss was about. It turns out it was Johnny Bench who was the special guest host of the breakfast; he was the company’s celebrity spokesperson and we were there because of another spotless year of safety. He shook our hands and signed anything we had in them, whether we wanted him to or not. After a few minutes it finally occurred to me that it was because of Johnny Bench that my dad got his nickname Johnny Wrench; my dad’s name was John and for a short time he played catcher on the Proto Tool’s company softball team. I never really understood that before.

Anyway, we got to meet Johnny Bench, we got our picture taken with him and we got to see a Reds game in which Johnny Bench and some of the remaining members of the Big Red Machine played. At the time
I was simply taken by the fact that this guy seemed completely normal, athletic yet gentle, friendly and a genuinely nice guy; if that’s all I ever knew about him that would have been enough. It wasn’t until a few years later, when he retired, that I realized that Johnny Bench was as great a ball player as he was. His impact on the game of baseball and the Reds organization was absolutely incredible and he is considered by many to be the best catcher to play the game and one of the best ambassadors in sports. He is one of the reasons I am a Red’s fan today.

My impression of Johnny Bench was formed by meeting him, without knowing much about him previously; I could tell that he was something special. I didn’t find him special just because people went out of their way to meet him because he was famous rather, I thought he was special because he seemed like a really good person who just happened to be the best at what he did, which I didn’t find out about until later. He had a graciousness and humility about him that was different than most famous people and that stood out to me. In other words, my impressions of Johnny Bench were formed by my own encounter with him and not solely based on what other’s told me.

A similar situation takes place in our gospel today. After asking the disciples who others’ say he is, Jesus asks his disciples who THEY think He is based on THEIR own experiences and not the impression of others. Jesus does this in order to assess and guide his disciples to the Truth. Peter’s response and profession of Jesus as the Christ, the anointed one and the Son of the living God is important here because of how he came to that understanding. Peter came to this realization because it was revealed to him slowly, by the Father, through his experiences of being in Jesus’ presence and through the experiences and relationship that they shared but most importantly through faith.

Imagine this encounter with Jesus took place today and he asked us “Who do YOU say that I am?” How would you respond? It is a question that we can really only answer through OUR OWN experience and with our own individual faith. This faith is God’s gift to us “from him and through him and for him,” as St. Paul says in our second reading. “Who do YOU say that I am,” based on your own experiences? In a way, this
question is asked of us every time we come to Mass. This is why we are here today: to experience Christ in His Real Presence, collectively, for ourselves. Peter and the disciples knew and experienced Christ because He was with them and present to them. BUT THE SAME IS TRUE FOR US! He IS present with us NOW in three major ways. First, He is present in the Word of God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Jesus IS the Word incarnate and is therefore PRESENT in the Word! Secondly, He is present with us in the Eucharist: the real Body and Blood of Christ. Finally and equally as important, He is with us in the community, the Church, that gathers here and around the world to celebrate and worship together: “when two or more are gathered in my name, I am there.” We experience the FULNESS of Christ in the Church: a gathering of believers, strengthened in the sacraments, built on the profession of Peter and guarded by his successors, the popes, who are guided by the Holy Spirit.

As such, each of us is challenged to come to the same personal profession about who Jesus is as Peter did through our own experiences and through faith as given to us by God. He invites us to truly experience Him for ourselves through prayer and active participation in the Mass and the sacraments but that is not the end of it. Like the disciples, we are to continue His work here on earth. In other words, we must also take our experiences of Christ into the world to share it with others in order to draw them to Christ so they may experience Him for THEMSELVES, not solely based on what others have told them.

What is important here is that each of us has the opportunity, through grace, to experience Jesus in the Church through the Mass and the Sacraments. My encounter with Johnny Bench informed my impression of him, not what others told me about him. Yes, he was an amazing baseball player who did amazing things, but I didn’t know that at the time and only knew what I experienced. The same is true with Christ. We must make our own assessment of who Christ is to us through our own experiences with Him as revealed to us by God, just like Peter. We have that opportunity through our prayers, through scriptures, through the Eucharist and through the Mass. And as I experienced in Cincinnati as a kid, whether it’s preachers or catchers, it is the encounter that defines our experience.