21st Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A – August 24, 2014

Jesus, Julia and Me

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

For those of you who don’t know, my background and profession are in the culinary arts. And as you can see, it has involved a lot of trial and error: certainly lots of trial! Anyway, in my last semester of culinary school my classmates and I spent 3 weeks in each of the four restaurants on campus that were open to the public: the first week and a half waiting tables in the front of the house and the other in the kitchen cooking.

One day as we were getting ready in the kitchen for lunch service, we were informed that there were special guests on the campus touring around in order to get video for a piece that was going to be on Good Morning America. We were too busy to be overly concerned about it and kept on prepping. Suddenly the crew came into our kitchen and began wandering around. We were told to just keep doing what we were doing and to ignore the cameras. So I did, until all of the sudden a shadow was cast over the stove were I was working and a voice said, “and what is this dish, you’re making?” I looked up and saw the then stooped but still imposing figure of Julia Child standing next to me asking me what I was making. My jaw hit the floor but I gathered myself together quickly and explained exactly what I was making and for a brief moment we were having a conversation. Then out of nowhere I heard a voice say, “Cut! That was great. Could you do that again but this time, face this way and blah, blah, blah…” They never ended up using any of the footage as far as I know.
I had seen Julia Child on TV and in books and was very familiar with the many caricatures of her that existed and so I had a particular impression of who she was or what she was like was based on those. But now the veil was lifted and I no longer needed to rely on the impressions of others; I had conversed with her and had an encounter with her of my own. She was a large, lovely and genuine person but more importantly she was a NORMAL person. Now I certainly didn’t get to know her intimately or well, but my impression of her did change and I was able to make my own assessments of her based on my own personal experience, brief though it was.

A similar situation takes place in our gospel today. Jesus asks his disciples who others say he is in order to gauge how he is understood by others. He then asks the disciples who THEY think he is based on their OWN experiences, not the impression of others, in order to guide them to the truth. Peter’s profession of Jesus as the Christ, the anointed one and the Son of the living God is important here because Jesus didn’t TELL Peter or any of the disciples the truth about himself, rather, it was revealed to them by the Father, through their experiences in his presence and the relationship they had with him but more importantly through faith.

Imagine this encounter with Jesus took place today and he posed these questions to us. How would we answer these questions? Who do others say Son of Man is? We can turn to segments of the media and our culture and say, “to some He is an historical figure who established a religious system that has splintered and divided and has been to root of much of the turmoil in the world.” Some might say, “He is an ideal that is outdated and maybe even no longer relevant”, while others might say, “He doesn’t or never did exist” while still others might say, “he is my personal savior.”

So, how would you respond if Jesus asked, “who do YOU say that I am?” 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 given to us “from him and through him and for him” as 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 for ourselves. Peter and the disciples knew and experienced Christ because He was with them and present to them. BUT WE DO TO! He IS present with us NOW in three major ways. First, 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! Secondly, he is present with us in the Eucharist: the real Body and Blood of Christ. Finally and equally as important, is that he is with us in this 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 FULLNESS of Christ in the Church: a gathering of believers strengthened in the sacraments, built on the profession of Peter and guarded by his successors who are guided by the Holy Spirit.

As such, each of us must move beyond what others have told us about Jesus. Each of us must come to the same personal profession about who Jesus is as Peter did. 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 what we’ve experienced in the presence of Christ into the world in order to share it with others and make Him known to them as well. We are sent forth to put our faith into action. Whether it is comforting a grieving friend or relative or helping those less fortunate or acting in a moral way, our action make Christ present to others regardless of race, creed, class, age or gender. It is not easy and may even be met with challenges, apathy, misunderstandings or even hostility. But this should not deter us because we know that the troubles we may encounter doing Christ’s work are unified with the suffering he endured FIRST to bring us salvation.

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 Julia Child de-mystified her for
me and made me see that she was normal person who did incredible things, much like Peter.

Encountering Jesus, on the other hand makes us realize that we are ALL called to do incredible things despite our limitations and short comings, much like Peter. We all have various impressions of Christ informed by others but today we are called here, in the Mass, to look beyond the world’s view and experience Christ for ourselves.