

Homily. 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time. Year. B. 14/15 September 2024.

No one likes being labeled, even though at times we've all been labeled and have labeled others. Labels based on certain personal characteristics limit us. They cast an unfair light on the complexity and depth of our personality and nature. Even labels that seem positive can be harmful because they set up expectations we may be unable to consistently live up to in practice. As examples, think of sports persons, academics and politicians who have a bad day on the field, get things wrong or enact poor policies for the public. The high esteem their labels heralded quickly evaporates when these people don't live up to our expectations.

In Jesus time one of the labels was that of being 'the Christ'. This is a Greek word meaning the promised and chosen one of God sent to liberate God's people from their oppression and sins. Over time this label became infused with political and military connotations. Various people had risen up to seek these goals, had been labeled as 'the Christ' only to then fail in their revolution and disappear into the mist of history.

When Jesus asked his disciples who people thought he was they told him that the public considered him to be a prophetic figure, a spokesperson from and for God. He didn't deny this, for it was true, but there was more to him than that. Asking them who they thought he was led Peter to say that he was 'the Christ' the one everyone was awaiting. Again, not denying this for it would prove to be true, Jesus was quick to ask for quiet about this label, this title. He then set about correcting their wrong expectations about what being the Christ of God really meant.

Their images were of a victorious commander who would lead a Jewish revolt against the occupying Romans, casting them out of Palestine and installing a new rule according to God's law, the Jewish scriptures, our Old Testament. The disciples, saw themselves as the tip of the spear in this revolution, the 'Generals' 2nd in command only to Jesus. They saw themselves as coming to share in the glory, power and admiration of all once their Christ-leaders victory was accomplished. This weight and vision of the 'Christ label' wasn't in Jesus mind or heart, not at all the way that God was working with the Christ God had sent to us. As we've heard the real path was one of sacrifice, rejection suffering and death. Little wonder then, label stripped bare, his vision of the future so shattered, that Peter objected strongly to what Jesus was teaching. This led Jesus to say that Peter's picture was Satanic, opposed to God's way.

Every human attempt at creating utopia has failed and it always will. It's simply impossible for fallible beings to create and enact a perfect system, rule and future. Yes, we're to do our best to improve our systems, putting them at the service of others, but let's not kid ourselves. We aren't God; not even mini-gods. Rather, as Jesus has shown, at our best we're servants of God playing our vital yet passing part in the great plan and dream for humanity and the world of the One Living and true God. We either accept this fact of life, our human reality, or drift off into schemes and dreams of our own that won't be fulfilled and that must inevitably fail. Faith that is real seeks from us works and deeds that serve the good of others. Let's joyfully do these works in the Spirit, but always under the guidance and leadership of the Christ who was crucified for our salvation.