

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear Parishioners and Friends,

Most of us are curious about what others think of us. Children like regular reassurance that they are loved by their parents and family, and often they put direct questions to their elders about their feelings in their regard. Adults are more circumspect in posing such questions, yet they are equally curious. The fact is we all like to be well thought of, we gain reassurance from knowing that our character is esteemed, that our friendship is valued and that people generally appreciate what we are doing and the way we are behaving.

What applies to the majority of us ordinary parishioners or citizens applies even more to those in public life, especially if their public functions depend on our vote. Politicians particularly are keen to be popular: do you folks think I am doing a good job? We answer this question at the polling booth. Most public figures want to know what their rating is among the public, they are keen to find out how others see them and what their take is on the status they, the politicians, claim. This explains the regularity of opinion polls. Politicians want to keep their fingers on the pulse of society, hence the frequent polls which we read in our Sunday newspapers. Senior churchmen too are just as sensitive to the opinion of them in the pews and, even if they do not hire polling companies to test what people feel about them, their postbag delivers more than enough information.

This curiosity, manifest among today's church leaders or politicians, is nothing new. In today's gospel we see that Jesus was curious to know whom it was people took him to be. What is the word on the streets? Who do people say that I am? We can imagine that this question, which he addressed to his closest friends and associates, having distanced himself physically from the busy towns and villages of his native Galilee to the remoter location of Caesarea Philippi, was as much motivated by genuine human curiosity as by any deeper theological purpose. Jesus, who was by now a well-known figure in Galilee, was keen to know what impression he was making. Was his message getting across? Who did people think he was? The initial reply from his close friends was that his words and actions reminded people of figures out of their biblical tradition such as Elijah or Jeremiah, prophets of centuries before. They also associated him closely with John the Baptist. Jesus was doubtless interested in this information, yet he wanted to discover whom it was those who knew him much better, those whom he had graced by his friendship, understood him to be.

Most of us have a lifelong association with Jesus, we have been learning about him since we were small children, we have been celebrating the major events of his earthly life in the great rituals of the Church each year. And yet that question which Jesus posed at Caesarea Philippi can legitimately be asked of us too? Whom do I say that Jesus is, how well do I know him, and how do I explain him to others? Or do I even bother?

Father Patrick.