

You might recall that in the gospel last week we heard about that Canaanite woman who begged Jesus to heal her daughter. At first Jesus rebuffed her because she did not belong to his people and his religion. She persisted by telling him that she knew about him and that she believed he could heal her daughter. Finally, Jesus recognised her great faith and told her to go on her way and that her daughter would be healed. What was on display last week was the faith of this woman. And we learnt that faith could even be received by those who were outsiders.

We heard another story of faith in today's gospel. Unlike last week, where the focus was on the faith that can be found outside the community, this time it was about faith within the community of disciples. Jesus asked his disciples a very direct question, which was a prelude to any conversation about faith. He asked them who people were saying that he was. This got the disciples talking among themselves as they named what people were saying. All the answers pointed to Jesus being a holy man in the tradition of the prophets. But then Jesus asked a slightly different question. He wanted to know not who others think he is, but who the disciples think he is. To answer that question means not just knowing a few things about Jesus, such as that he acts like the prophets of old. The answer they would be giving would come from being with him for some time, listening to him, hearing his teaching, watching him, especially his miracles, and being in conversation with him. The answer they would give would come from knowing him.

Peter is the one who responds on behalf of the disciples. His response shows that he recognises Jesus as the Christ, God's anointed one. He recognises him as the Son of the living God. If we think about it, this is a remarkable insight. We might wonder how he could say this. Obviously, part of it comes from being close to Jesus, watching his works and hearing teaching for so long, but that doesn't explain it all. In fact, Jesus declares that it wasn't just those human experiences that helped Peter say what he said. Rather, he could only recognise Jesus because God had revealed it to him. But we must be careful that we don't see these two aspects as unrelated to each other. God always reveals through human experiences. We need only think of the major events of revelation in the Old Testament. It was through the escape from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea that people came to know God as the living God who was their saviour. So, in the case of Peter, God worked through the experience of being with Jesus and knowing him so that Peter would recognise him as the Son of the living God.

What happens next is important because Jesus declares that Peter will be the rock on which he will build his church. It is Peter's faith that is the rock. And future generations will share Peter's faith as they come to recognise Jesus as the Son of the living God. It is as though Peter's faith is the model of the faith of the disciple. Throughout the ages, the touchstone of Christian faith has been the faith of Peter and the other apostles. We know too, that in addition to his recognition of Jesus as the Christ, Peter will later give testimony to the resurrection of Jesus. The early Christian community would say that the Lord has truly risen and has appeared to Peter. The Christian community turns to the faith of Peter so that we may recognise Jesus as the Son of the living God and make our own profession of faith.

I think we can realise how important the community is for its members as they have come to faith and to recognition of Jesus. So, we need only think of our own experience of the Christian community. It is the place where we worship together and profess our faith in a formal way. It is also a place where we interact with others and listen to each other and hear of our experiences of faith. Sharing those experiences and sharing our hearing of the word of God nurtures our faith and helps us to mature as disciples. Like those first disciples, we hand on the faith to the next generation and help them to recognise Jesus as the Christ.

As we learnt from the Canaanite woman last week, faith is never simply an intellectual knowing about God or about Jesus, it is primarily trusting him and being in a relationship with him. Her faith showed the link between faith and healing. This has always been a characteristic of Christian faith: it manifests itself in action. Here again, we see the role of the Christian community. In the community, and because of faith, we look out for each other, we care for the needy, we pray for those who are sick, and we support each other in difficult times.

The community is a privileged place where the Holy Spirit stirs up our hearts so that we may truly know Jesus who died and is risen. May we listen to that same Holy Spirit.,