



A Living Sacrifice
Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (August 27, 2023)

“Don’t just *go* to church. *be* the Church.” This decades old saying challenges us to identify our beliefs and attitudes toward the Church.

But what does it mean to “be” the Church? How do we become the Church? What are the signs that reveal the Church of Christ?¹

The gospel scene opens with the most important, intimate, and serious question one person can ever ask another: "Who do you say that I am?" The disciples couldn't dodge the question with an indirect, "They say ...". So, Peter took the risk and blurted out what they had been thinking and hoping: "You are the Christ."

That was no simple statement. Although he surely didn't understand all its ramifications, calling Jesus "the Christ" entailed a commitment as radical as any vow. It's as strong a statement as, "Yes, I will marry you," or "I am consecrating my whole life to this." Peter's bold confession that Jesus was God's Son, implied a radical promise to follow, to listen, to obey Jesus as one would obey God alone. His statement indicated that absolutely nothing in the world could take precedence over his response to what Jesus would ask of him.

Upon hearing him, Jesus responded, "How blessed you are, Peter! This is not something you could figure out on your own." Peter did not figure it out by himself or by human argument, and he could not live it out alone. God was with him through his religious heritage, his relationship with Jesus, his prayer, the companionship of the other disciples: all these people and experiences were included in God's revelation to him. All of

¹ <https://lutheranreformation.org/theology/marks-of-the-church/>

them enabled him to keep growing into the commitment he had professed. By confessing Jesus to be the Christ Peter pledged to follow him.

Jesus affirmed Peter's faith and entrusted to him the ministry of the keys: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." In other words, the power to let in or to keep out, to forgive or to let go unforgiven.

But when Jesus revealed that he was about to face the suffering of the cross, Peter blotted out: "Not so fast!" He couldn't bear the thought of his master being persecuted, tortured, and killed as a low-life criminal. Why? Because that meant they were following a loser, they had to change their interpretation of the meaning of the Messiah, from a triumphant king, leader of a freedom restoring army to a non-violent, lost sheep kind of shepherd.

Peter showed one moment to be a rock of faith and the next to be a stumbling block. One moment Peter declared Jesus to be the Messiah of God, a faith that is at the foundation of the Church of Christ, and the next he is discouraging Jesus to do what the Messiah does and does not accept all that will befall Jesus for his faithful love.

Keys: what do we do with them? What responsibility do we hold.

Some people are on a constant quest for the perfect church. They seem to gain no peace as they move from church to church seeking the perfect fit. But as long as the Church is made of people, she will never be perfect. We follow Christ and commit to learn from him, and yet much of our stubbornness, disloyalty, and self-promotion get in the way.

Martin Luther explained that there are seven signs (or marks) by which we can identify the Church of Christ. God's church is recognized by (1) possession of God's Word, (2) right administration of baptism, (3) right administration of communion, (4) exercise of church discipline or the

“office of the keys”, (5) qualified leadership, (6) worship characterized by prayer and thanksgiving, and (7) the possession of the cross.²

Paul encourages Christians to be a living sacrifice: all that we are and all that we do is dedicated to Christ and to God’s kingdom. The challenge is to identify and stay away from the ways of the world and, when that happens, to be “transformed by the renewing of [our] mind.”

When is the Church at its best? Obviously, when we are so closely associated to Christ to identify with him and are called “other” Christs! It’s when we labor for the advancement of the kingdom; when we include all with no exception into the fellowship of the believers; when we become bread for others; when we build the Beloved Community through forgiveness and reconciliation; when we do not shy away from loving others even when they are set to hurt us; when, in other words, our spiritual worship transforms our prayer into acts of justice for the world.

And when is the Church at its worst?

Well, Jesus said that on that foundational faith he will build *his* Church. If this is Christ’s Church, why do we act as if it were ours?

- Why patriarchy? Why hierarchy?
- Why the inquisition?
- Why colonialism?
- Why the Doctrine of Discovery?
- Why the enslavement of African people?
- Why racism? White supremacy?
- Why Christian Nationalism?
- Why exclusion and discrimination?

Paul calls for “sober judgement...according to the measure of the faith God has given us.” Perhaps, humility will help us in that sober judgement and certainly also gratitude. God is aware of the depth of our faith, and even in our best moments when we confess Jesus to be our

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/mark-church-cross/>

Lord, we need to be aware that we are a work in progress and God isn't done with us, yet.

Jesus has entrusted the keys to Peter, that is to the whole Church, and we need to use them in humble faith and not in arrogance and selfish gain, embracing the cross and not our self-promoting ideologies.

Today, we find ourselves called to answer Jesus' question for ourselves. Happily, we don't need to figure it out alone, nor live it alone. God's revelation comes through community, Word and sacrament. May we be as generous and kind to others as Jesus is to us. Amen.