

IV Pentecost (7c)
Lk 9.18-24
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Fr. Patrick Allen

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I suspect most of us remember, if only vaguely, being made to read at some point in a highschool history class George Washington's "Farewell Address." A portion of that parting advice to our young nation was "beware foreign entanglements." *Beware foreign entanglements* – advice which, at least to me (and not to get political), seems more attractive and wise all the time.

Attractive and wise on the geopolitical level, but also on the personal and social levels. To "not have a dog in that fight," as we sometimes say (with no apologies to Michael Vick), allows us to enjoy a seat "above the fray," a position from which we might, perhaps, if you are something like me, offer self-satisfied commentary on the actions and words of others as they get all worked up and hot and bothered over matters about which we have no real concern and no vested interest.

But to have *no vested interest* is sometimes not only a personal advantage, it is an important element leading to, if it doesn't actually guarantee, justice. We want our umpires to be neutral arbiters, to call it like they see it, and that's why we don't allow them to gamble on baseball.

This past Friday it was revealed that the judge suggested by the fine folks at British Petroleum to adjudicate the more-than-200 lawsuits already stemming from the Gulf oil rig disaster receives tens of thousands of dollars annually in royalties from the oil industry – which doesn't mean that he would be anything less than scrupulously fair, but it does raise the question, which in itself is troubling. We require our judges to be disinterested third parties.

But disinterest can be a mask for self-interest. Politicians often will speak to the press off the record, sometimes for very good reasons, but sometimes also so that they will be free to switch sides of an issue later on, if that's the direction the wind is blowing.

And then, of course there is the non-committal dating man, who likes the girl, even to some degree loves her, but a ring and a vow and a lifetime of running his fishing plans past someone else – he finds that Rubicon chilly and wide.

Keeping our wheels under us and our options wide open – it's an idea, a lifestyle, that certainly has its allure. We don't like to get pinned down, which is why there was, I imagine, perhaps a certain amount of squirming and hemming and hawing and staring at the ground as Jesus one day interrupted his prayers to look at his disciples and ask them a simple and direct question: *Who do you say that I am?* That question does not simply seek information for information's sake; it seeks commitment. That question, from this man, is a fork in the road.

If some are diffident, St. Peter is not. As ever, he's out in front, giving his answer perhaps before even thinking through the ramifications. But Peter's answer, his confession, is the truth; he gets it right: *You are the Christ of God* – the fulfillment of God's promise: the serpent-crushing seed promised to Eve in the garden; the water & life-giving rock in the wilderness; great David's greater Son; the true Shepherd and Consolation of Israel; the Root of Jesse; the Coming One who in Jesus has arrived. He gets it right; he has seen and heard and understood. St. Matthew gives us Jesus' response to Peter's confession: *Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.*

But again, there's more to this than information, more to it than producing the correct answer. Because *You are the Christ of God* is not a datum you can know – a fact you can admit – and yet remain neutral about. As soon as you say it, you're involved, *entangled*.

This year the Diocese of South Carolina lost one of its great characters, Dick Banks, a delegate to the Diocesan Convention for more than 60 straight years. I was Dick's parish priest for a few years at St. Matthew's Parish in Ft. Motte, and in all that time, nor in the years since, I never confessed to Dick that one of my great grandmothers was a Banks. Because, and if you knew Dick you know it's true, to do so would have meant a high level of involvement. I just never believed I had the time to devote to coming out of the closet as an openly possible relation of Dick's as he unearthed letters and family Bibles and yellowed clippings of obituaries, produced photographs of gravestones and all the other materiel of the genealogical obsessive (no offense, Fr. Dan). I mean, think of all the hours of television watching I would have while lost connecting to another human being.

Now, it is one thing, one kind and degree of commitment, to admit potential kinship to Dick Banks. But it is of course quite another to say to – or even merely about – Jesus of Nazareth, *You are the Christ of God*. To do so is to lose control – either by running from him, with the hound of Heaven forever nipping at our heels, or by ceding control to him, which means conforming the pattern of our life to his, our body to his broken and pierced body, to save our life only by losing it in him.

Those are some broad strokes, but we can be somewhat more precise and think of one aspect of what this confession meant for Peter and the Apostolic band of which he was and is the center.

When Peter says *You are the Christ*, it is an act of political sedition, punishable by death. Because if Jesus is the Christ in history, then here we have an authority higher than Caesar, and that is a claim that Caesar cannot and will not abide. This is precisely the card that St. Luke will show the chief priests and scribes playing when they drag Jesus before Pilate: *We found this man saying . . . that he himself is Christ, a King*, they say. In the years in and around the life of Jesus, the Romans crucified more than a dozen would be Judean messiahs and ground down their followers to dust. But in the irony of God's great and redeeming love, it is precisely in submitting himself to Caesar's wrath that Jesus fulfills his vocation as Christ.

So you see, there was no disinterested way for Peter to say, "You are the Christ of God." To say so was to become involved, entangled, to commit. In fact, this confession of Peter's is the first step on a journey that will one day lead to a cross of his own in Nero's gardens on the Vatican hill.

And it is the same for us, in ways that are true for all of us and particular to each of us. It costs, and of course Jesus himself urges us to count the cost, which is to confront the cross, and then to join Jesus there.

But the cross, As St. Peter's 264th successor said recently, was for Peter and is for us "hard to accept; instinct impels one to avoid it and the tempter leads one to believe that it is wiser to be concerned with saving oneself rather than losing one's life through faithfulness to love."

But of course, that's just the thing! Jesus, the Christ of God, surrendered his life through faithfulness to love; in fact, he is the faithfulness of love. He is there: willingly, for us, on the cross. *The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed.*

So to confess with Peter that Jesus is the Christ is to lose our neutrality, to become involved, entangled, committed. But then we find that he is already and from eternity committed – utterly, implacably, to-the-end – committed to us. And joining him there, on his cross, in baptism and in the daily taking up of own crosses and laying down of our lives for one another, for those Jesus loves and for his sake – which is a living faith – we may have the hope, the sure and certain hope, of joining him in his resurrection.

Who do you say that I am? Jesus asked Peter back then, and asks you and me today and everyday. It is both an instinct and a temptation, as Pope Benedict said, to save our lives, to maintain our neutrality, to keep our options open, to run from that question. But just as lovers find their freedom not in open options but in their willing and full till-death-do-us-part giving of themselves to one another, so do we all become truly ourselves, and find our lives, by joining with Peter in the confession that Jesus is the Christ of God – which is to enter his embrace, who for us stretched his arms wide on the hard wood of the cross.

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