

Homily for the 21st Sunday Year A

St. Michael Paknanas was a young *Greek Christian* who lived in Athens under Ottoman rule. As a young man he worked as a gardener in Athens in the 1800s. The Turks, who enslaved Greece at the time, were trying to convince him to give up his faith. When flattery and wealth failed to persuade him, they tried different means and ways to make him renounce his faith in Jesus.

When all the torture failed to make him renounce his faith, the executioner prepared to behead the young man. Yet, feeling compassion for him, he hesitated. So, he began cutting his neck slowly with the sword by administering very light blows, while asking the martyr to reconsider. But **St. Michael Paknanas** said, *"I told you, I am a Christian. I refuse to give up my faith."*

The axman struck with another light blow to make some more blood flow, to possibly convince him. The martyr repeated, *"I told you, I am a Christian. Strike with all your might, for the faith of Christ."* This totally aggravated the executioner. He did exactly that, and St. Michael was sent to the heavenly mansions.

These are the people who understood who Jesus is. In today's Gospel, Jesus asks His disciples an important question: "Who do you say that I am?"

Jesus takes His disciples to *Caesarea Philippi* a region filled with pagan temples, political tension, and secular power. Standing against that backdrop, Jesus asks His disciples who the crowd thinks He is. They reply with respected titles: John the Baptist, Elijah, or Jeremiah. But then Jesus turns the mirror directly onto them: "But who do you say that I am?"

Simon Peter answers for all the disciples, declaring without any hesitation that they are convinced he is the '*Promised Messiah and Son of the living God*'. *Jesus says that "it was not from human reasoning that he tells, but he had come to acknowledge his messiahship through divine revelation, from Jesus' Father who is in heaven".*

Peter recognized Jesus not simply as a prophet or teacher, but as the Son of God and the Saviour. Jesus then gives Peter a unique mission: "Upon this rock I will build my church."

To call someone a "*rock*" is one of the greatest compliments. The ancient rabbis had a saying that when God saw Abraham, he exclaimed: "*I have discovered a rock to find the world upon*". Through Abraham God established a nation for himself. Through faith Peter grasped who Jesus truly was. He was the first apostle to recognize Jesus as the Anointed One (Messiah and Christ) and the only begotten Son of God.

Here we understand that *Peter came to his understanding about Jesus' true identity because God the father revealed that knowledge to him*. It's the same for us. We cannot accept and understand who Jesus really is until the Spirit of God first prepared our hearts and minds to receive such wonderful news.

There are times in our life when we are confronted with a similar question, who is Jesus for me? Once Napoleon said about Jesus, "I know men, but Jesus is more than a man.

Today Jesus asks each one of us the same question: "Who am I for you?" Is Jesus simply a teacher for me? A prophet? Someone I pray to when I have a problem? Or is He truly **the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Lord of my life?**" May Jesus strengthen our faith, make us firm like Peter, and help us to live every day knowing who Jesus truly is and having the courage to proclaim Him not only with our lips, but also through our lives. **Amen.**