

## 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

In the last two weeks, names of Olympic athletes like Michael Phelps from the United States and Usain Bolt (known as “lightning”) from Jamaica have become household words. Many people around the world are familiar with their extraordinary accomplishments. And from the smiles on their faces, they too seem to be aware of what they have achieved in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. So you could say that we know who they are, and they know who they are.

It is also clear to us that they could never have reached this point without knowing what they wanted. Michael Phelps wanted to beat the record of Mark Spitz. He had a definite goal. And so his life has been one of great focus, with most of his days spent in the swimming pool. He intentionally became a “swimming machine,” with everything fine tuned and running smoothly. When a swimmer can find that extra energy at the end of a race to reach forward and win by 1/100 of a second, you know that something amazing is happening.

My point here is that this doesn’t just happen by accident. Olympic athletes have to know who they are, what they are capable of, and what they want to accomplish. There is no way that a human being would put that kind of dedication and effort into training day after day, and year after year, without having a very clear path in mind. You could also say that rarely would achievements of this kind be reached without having the dedication and effort that are necessary.

In the gospel today, Jesus asks his disciples, “*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*” After offering various answers, the disciples don’t seem to get it, and so Jesus presses them further: “*Who do you say that I am?*” For Jesus to accomplish his goal of planting the seeds of the Kingdom of God in our midst, it was very important that the disciples be clear in understanding who Jesus was for them. Like Olympic athletes, much dedication and effort was going to be required of them if they were to follow Jesus and help him accomplish his goals. Without having a firm understanding of who Jesus was for them, they might not muster the dedication and the effort that was necessary.

The same can be said for us, twenty centuries later. When fundamentalist-type Christians ask me if I have “found” Jesus, I always want to say I didn’t know he was “lost”—because we Catholics don’t use that kind of language. But their question is a sincere one and a good one. They are asking other people if they know who Jesus is—and if they welcome Jesus into their lives as their savior. You can talk about Jesus in a lot of different ways: as founder of a religion, as revolutionary Jewish reformer, as great teacher, as personal savior, or as Son of God (just to mention a few). But how you relate to Jesus makes a big difference in terms of the effort and dedication you put into being his follower.

So everyone here could think about these kinds of questions this week: *How do I really see Jesus? Do I see Jesus as Good Shepherd? As Savior and Redeemer? Is he my beloved friend, closer to me than my spouse or child or father or mother? Is Jesus a living experience for me, walking with me, loving me, forgiving me, helping me, and transforming my life and my outlook? What difference does Jesus make in my life? Have I really given my life to him? Who do I say that Jesus is in my daily life?*

You see, the way I live and behave on a daily basis will reveal who Jesus is for me. If I find joy, and love, and peace in Jesus, this will be reflected to others around me. If I deeply experience the understanding and forgiveness of Jesus for my failings, I am much more apt to extend that same understanding and forgiveness to others. If I experience Jesus as my Lord and Savior, then I will increasingly try to surrender my life to his power. If I recognize Christ as present in each and every person, then I will dedicate my life in humble and loving service to others. If I realize that God’s hands are lovingly active in the events of my life, then I will give praise and thanks to God for everything that happens to me, even when it seems difficult at the time.

If we want faith to be a powerful force in our lives and in the world, then we have to know clearly who Jesus is for us, and what role he plays in our lives. Like Olympic athletes, we have to put effort and dedication into pursuing this goal, or it will never become a reality. Knowing who we are as God’s children, what we are capable of spiritually, and knowing what we want to accomplish is absolutely necessary. Things like this rarely happen by accident—more typically, because of spiritual inattentiveness, often nothing happens.

Rabbi Harold Kushner (who you may remember from the book “*Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*”) wrote the following in “*Overcoming Life’s Disappointments*”:

*Every day, for years, he visited his wife in the nursing home. She suffered from Alzheimer’s disease; with each day she slipped further and further away in the fog of dementia. Every day he would feed her lunch. He would sit with her and show her the pictures of their children, telling her the latest family news and stories she would forget as soon as she heard them. He would patiently remind her who he was and explain that they were married and had been for the past 52 years and they had two daughters and a son and four beautiful grandchildren. He would hold her hand as she drifted in and out of consciousness.*

*Before leaving, he would kiss her and tell her how much he loved her—and she would never realize nor remember later that he had even been there. His heartbroken friends would ask him, “Why do you keep going when she doesn’t even know who you are?” And he would always reply, “Because I know who I am.”*

It is in realizing exactly who Jesus is and the meaning of the gospel he embodies, that we start to understand who we are and what our lives should be about.