

August 23, 2020

“Who We Are in Jesus”

By Edgar F Solís

On May 5, 1862, a battle was fought in my country of origin at Puebla Mexico. The battle was between the Army of the liberal government headed by Benito Juarez and the French forces sent by Napoleon III to establish a French satellite state in Mexico. The battle, which ended in a Mexican victory, is celebrated on the national calendar of Mexican holidays as Cinco de Mayo (5th of May). There are many stories about this important event. One of them is about the speech given to the Mexican Army by General Zaragoza. The General understood that the Mexican Army was smaller and had less military training and yet here they were, facing what was at that time the most powerful Army in the world, the French Army.

Facing the troops, Mexican General Zaragoza said: “In front of us we have the most powerful army in the world, but you are the bravest and best sons of Mexico.” As we all know that day the limited but brave Army of Mexico won a legendary victory, defeating France and containing the European invasion to the American continent.

Today’s gospel passage includes many crucial and theological issues, but in my message I want you to pay attention to just one of them.

### **Bible Context**

A Bible commentary states that *Jesus and his entourage have just entered “the district of Caesarea Philippi” (Matthew 16:13)*. Note the name: *Caesar-ea*. These Roman settlements were near a temple built by Herod the Great, dedicated to Rome and the Emperor Augustus, the first Emperor of the Roman Empire - and a man, please note, who added to his title the phrase *Divi*

*Filius, "Son of the Divine." So far, Matthew's narrative has focused on Jesus' teaching, healing, and feeding - all to the amazement of the crowds, who speculate about who he may or may not be. "What sort of man is this?" his own disciples ask each other. In this week's passage, Jesus calls the question. Who do they - and who do you - say that I am? It is important to remember the social, religious and political context; an oppressive empire and a political leader who believes he is divine. It is in that context that Jesus asks his disciples: Who do people - and who do you - say that I am? I strongly believe that Jesus asked this question because it was important for him to make his disciples reflect not only on Jesus' identity but on their own. Imagine Jesus saying; "what do you say?" Now we all know that Peter's answer seems to get it right: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). "Messiah" literally means "the anointed one," the promised deliverer, ordained and commissioned by God to save God's people. As a Bible commentary mentions: *Jesus enthusiastically confirms the answer, and Peter, no doubt, is elated. Remember, they've just arrived in Caesarea Philippi, the site of the temple dedicated both to Augustus, Divi Filius himself, and to the imperial oppressors under whom the Jewish people have suffered for so long. The contrast is vivid: Against Caesar, you are our Messiah, the true Divi Filius!**

### **Theological Reflection**

I do believe that Jesus wants them to become aware of who he really is in order to make them think about who they really are! The gospel teaches us that for Jesus, messiahship doesn't mean modeling an oppressive political leader but rather it means reversing Caesar's way of arrogance, violence, and oppression into its opposite: the way of humility and restoration, justice and grace. Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Deliverer - but he comes on foot, not on a warhorse. He's accompanied by a rag-tag group of ordinary men and women, not an angelic

army. Here is the living child of “the living God,” born in a stable, humbly dressed and unarmed, walking boldly into imperial territory - where the mighty Augustus stands in his temple, eyes cold as stone.

And here is the important point. Jesus declares “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

Jesus is the true messiah, the God of humbleness, love and compassion who is advancing and pushing at the evil gates. It is the church that is moving forward! It is the church that is walking firmly ahead to defeat all injustice! The action of the verb “prevail” means resistance against an active and offensive force. In this case the Church is the one that is advancing against the gates of the hell which means that it doesn’t matter how bad our world looks, it is the power of God through the Church that is moving forward and bringing hope, love, and compassion to the humanity of this planet. Signs and actions of corruption, injustice inequality are everywhere- both then and now. *But look deeper, Jesus says. It’s all built on sand. There’s a deeper bedrock - and on that rock I will build my church. On the surface, it may not look like much: but on that rock - not the rock of Caesar, but the rock of a humble, persistent, living rock of faith - I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.*”

### **Takeaways**

Dear church, let’s join the movement to be a part of the community that moves forward against all evil! Let’s believe in Jesus’ power, and let’s also believe who we are in Jesus!

Remember my introductory story? I love to imagine what a humble and unprepared Mexican soldier may have thought about in front of such a powerful army during the Cinco de Mayo battle. When compared to the powerful French army those Mexican soldiers can certainly seem limited and unimpressive. Paraphrasing general Zaragoza’s words; “In front of us we have

powerful challenges, a global pandemic, political and economic turmoil, corruption, racism, evil, cruelty, but you are children of God, the Church! And the gates of hell will not prevail against you.” When we know who we are and that our identity is found in God, we can be a part of and witnesses to the wonders of God!

When compared to the great monuments of mighty empires that often represent the oppressive systems of the world, the Church can certainly seem unimpressive. But the good news of the Gospel is this: at the center of the church is not a statue but a person, our lord Jesus Christ! The living child of the living God, calling us all to a deeper, more human, more excellent way. Calling us to be what he wants us to be, to share the good news, and to transform the world with God’s power in us, amen!