

12<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time C “Jesus asks who do you say that I am?”

Fr. Frank Schuster

Legend has it, when Archbishop Connolly went to the barber, when he got asked the question “how would you like your haircut”, his response would be “In silence!” Whether this actually happened or not, who knows, but I sure appreciate the humor! You see, I get my hair cut roughly once every month. Since my hairstyle isn’t exactly rocket science, I typically go to one of the chain hair cut stores, look in the window, and if there isn’t a line, that is where I go. Since I have someone new cutting my hair every month, there is usually an awkward moment at the beginning of the haircut I have to get through. The reason for this is because most hair cut specialists out there love to talk with their customers and the first thing they usually ask is, “what do you do for a living”? When I tell them I am a Catholic priest, there is almost always the awkward moment where they stop snipping and choke on their gum. “Uh, a Catholic priest?” they usually want clarification. And I say, “Yes, a Catholic priest. My parish is Blessed Teresa down the Woodinville Duvall Rd”. To which they, say “Oh yeah, I’ve seen it”.

What follows is usually one of three outcomes, a) they are fallen away Catholics (opportunity to go fishing), b) they aren’t going to church anywhere at present (bigger fish), or c) “let me tell you how wonderful my protestant pastor is”. And I don’t mind it. It is an opportunity for a little evangelization. But what I find interesting is that, after they learn that I am a Catholic priest, how quickly their initial impression of me changes, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively depending on their understanding of Catholic priesthood (which varies greatly out there, a lot of different ideas out there, which makes going to the barber a rather adventurous undertaking). Nevertheless, I find it funny how the way they talk with me goes from rather casual to very formal at roughly the speed of light after they find out who I am.

And I admit I do this too to others. When I learn that the person in front of me is a veteran or a police officer or public servant, I stand up straighter, don’t you? This social phenomenon challenges me though and it makes me wonder why we begin so casually, sometimes dismissively with strangers, until we get to know them. There are reasons for this, I suppose. Nevertheless, it makes me wonder. After all, ask yourself, have you ever walked into an office or store, and you know you are just another face in the crowd, and wonder about people’s first impression of you? Have you ever asked the question in your head: Who do people say that I am?

Jesus asks his disciples this question, “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples give Jesus a number of different answers, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others say one of the ancient prophets has arisen”. And this is very interesting to me because if the people who actually saw Jesus in the flesh could have so many different answers, it is no wonder that if we took a poll of everyone here, the answer of who Jesus is may differ somewhat from person to person. The question of who we think Jesus should be isn’t always necessarily squared with who Jesus is.

And so, Jesus asks the disciples the most important question of all, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter responds correctly, “The Christ of God.” Now why does Jesus direct them not to share this with anyone? Once again, we have the basic problem. There was a disconnect in

people's mind about the question of who the Christ should be and who the Christ really is. You see, the Christ, translated Messiah or Anointed One, was commonly believed to be the next King David who was anointed by the prophet Samuel. The new King David was meant to unify the Jewish people and liberate Israel from foreign occupation.

Jesus however had bigger plans following the prophecy of prophets like Zechariah in our first reading, "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and petition, and they shall look on him whom they have pierced... and they shall grieve over him as one grieves over a first born... On that day there shall be open to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, a fountain to purify from sin and uncleanness."

And so Jesus defines the role of the Christ to his disciples, "The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected...and be killed and on the third day be raised." Jesus then defines for the disciples what it means to follow the Christ, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." The Christ wasn't about saving Israel from the Romans. The Christ was about saving the world from the tyranny of sin and death.

Now what can we take from this in terms of our understanding of Jesus? You see, I believe Jesus is asking each and every one of us the question, "Who do you say that I am?" This is perhaps the most important question Jesus will ever ask us. What is our answer? I believe there are some dangerous answers that do not square with the scriptures that should be avoided. For instance, many like to reduce Jesus to merely another historical philosopher or moral teacher. You see this effort to find the so called "historical Jesus" in various magazines and television shows from time to time. The troubles with reducing Jesus to just another moral teacher, historical figure, and philosopher are Gospel passages like we have today. Jesus clearly understood himself as a divine savior teaching his disciples to even offer their lives for the proclamation of his Gospel of salvation, to take up their crosses and follow him.

This gives us only two options to believe, either Jesus is indeed the Son of God to be worshiped or he is a very bad man to be opposed for saying whoever loses their life for my sake will save it. That is a bad thing to say unless you are indeed God. Yes, Jesus is a moral teacher, he is however more so God incarnate and our savior. We must not lose sight of that if we want to be a disciple of Jesus.

The meaning of Christ's role as savior however can be misconstrued as well. For instance, many televangelists over the years love to preach the Gospel of prosperity that misunderstands Jesus' role as savior in much the same way Jesus' contemporaries misunderstood the role of the Messiah. The idea is, if you are a faithful disciple of Jesus, you will become prosperous and wealthy, nothing bad will ever happen to you and your children will not get acne. Fr. Benedict Groechel, as I have shared with you in the past, called this the big lie. Why did he call this the big lie? It's a big lie because the Gospel of Prosperity has no place for the cross. Jesus says quite clearly, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." I think we can all agree that an adjective that best describes Jesus is "loving". This is true. An equally important adjective that describes Jesus however is "demanding".

Jesus' identity is demanding of us because once we have embraced Jesus' identity as savior in our life, we now must turn the table, look in the mirror, and ask the question, "who do I say that I am"? If Jesus is my Lord and savior, if I am called to follow him, in light of this, "who am I now, really? Does my life reflect this reality?" St. Paul answers this question for us in Galatians, "Brothers and sisters: Through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus...and if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendant, heirs according to the promise." Think about what that means. We belong to Christ. We are Abraham's descendants. We are heirs according to the promise. That is really cool! Amen?

What this means is, everything we experience or do in this life is a preparation for the everlasting life that awaits us. Through the crosses we carry, Jesus shows us the way to the resurrection. Through the sacraments, he touches us and gives us hope. Through the scriptures and tradition, he teaches us how to live and grow in holiness. Through the Eucharist, he feeds us as we make our pilgrimage through life. Through prayer, he consoles us, and at times admonishes us, to grow in discipleship. Through the love and compassion we share with one another, he blesses us as we bless others. We are invited to see Jesus in each other, to treat family members, coworkers, and even the strangers we meet in the stores or on the streets, as children of God and heirs to the promise.

My friends, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" And Jesus is asking us the same question. It might be the most important question Jesus ever asks us. Our answer has the power to change the world around us. The implications are eternal.