

## 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time “Ask Yourself, Who is Jesus?”

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Jesus asks the disciples “who do people say that I am?” And the disciples don’t know. Some say John the Baptist, still others Elijah, some say one of the prophets. Jesus asks the more haunting question, “but who do you say that I am?” Peter responds, “You are the Christ!” And here is a beautiful biblical example of how someone can be both right and wrong at the same time. It is an example of why the final exams they give future brain surgeons should never be multiple-choice. Peter thought, like many others, that Jesus was the new King David, who also was called a Christos, an anointed one. You remember the story: the prophet Samuel anointed David with oil in front of his older brothers which gave him the divine right to become king. The word for anointed one in Hebrew is where we get the word Messiah; in Greek, it’s where we get the word Christ. Peter, like so many others, hoped Jesus would be a new King David who would bring back the glory days of Israel.

The problem was: Peter and Jesus were not on the same page at that present moment of what being the Christ meant. It wasn’t until after the resurrection that Peter finally got it. Jesus wasn’t operating solely with a Davidic understanding of messiah but rather primarily with the understanding given to us through the prophets, namely Isaiah. We see this in the first reading. Isaiah writes of the new Christ, “I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard, my face I did not shield from buffets and spitting.” Later Isaiah writes, “...and by his wounds we are healed.”

And so Jesus asks, “Who do people say that I am?” As a theologian, I find it fascinating when I read authors who try to explain to me who Christ is. Pick any book about Jesus at the bookstore. By the end of the book, the Christ depicted strangely looks like the personality of the author writing the book. If we are a democrat, it is interesting that the Christ we believe in is a democrat. If we are a republican, how interesting it is that Christ is naturally a republican. Who knew? I think if a zucchini wrote a book about Jesus, Jesus would look like a zucchini. Meanwhile, if we are in denial about a human weakness we possess, how interesting it is that the Jesus we “believe” in is somehow accepting of our sinful behavior. It is a trap we can all fall into. What a surprise it is then when we discover that the Jesus we meet in the Gospels is sometimes quite different than the Jesus we have led ourselves to believe in. It is a strange phenomenon. We can all be guilty of it at times, even priests, bishops, cardinals and popes. Judging by our Gospel reading today, even the disciples are not off the hook. The disciples lived with Jesus day in and day out, some thought he was another John the Baptist, still others another Elijah, still others another King David. They were all wrong, reading into Christ what they themselves wanted to see.

Atheists go to town with this dynamic. A famous atheist of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century by the name of Ludwig Feuerbach dismissed the existence of God on just this phenomenon I have been talking about. All that God was, for Feuerbach, was merely a projection of the ego, simply an image of humanity's best self, if you please. Feuerbach wasn't alone either. Marx dismissed Christ as simply opium for the people. Freud dismissed God as a neurosis of the masses. Freud even described God as a fictitious "sugar daddy" that comes to pat us on the back when things go awry, a defense mechanism, nothing more.

The funny thing about these famous atheists' conclusions about God is that you cannot find their "definitions" of God anywhere in the bible. I have not found a passage in the bible that defines God even remotely as a sugar daddy or a drug or a projection of the ego. Their definitions of God are fictitious straw men and nothing more. As we see in the Gospel reading, even the disciples were guilty at times of thinking about Jesus, not "as God does but as human beings do." Being the Christ didn't mean being a glorious super prophet or new political King or a warlord. Quite the opposite, being the Christ meant, "to suffer greatly, be rejected, be killed, and rise in three days". And imagine the horror the disciples must have felt when Christ said, "whoever wishes to come after me must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me."

So I think we need to turn the tables here. What if Jesus is asking us individually today: "who do people say that I am?" I invite us all to answer honestly. How does society view who Jesus is? How do the people we deal with every day answer this question? How do we answer this question in different situations? For instance, is my answer to the question "who is Jesus?" different when I am here at church than when I am home with my family? Is my answer to the question, "who is Jesus?" different at home than when I am at work or school? How about when I am driving on the road, delayed by someone in front of me who has the audacity to drive the speed limit? How about at the checkout stand when the person in front of me brought a bag a pennies, and starts counting them out one by one? The answer we come up with to the question "who is Jesus" has a very strong influencing factor on how we conduct ourselves as a disciple of the Lord.

What if Jesus Christ is asking us today: "Who do you say that I am?" This might be the most important question Jesus will ever ask us. What is our answer? Who is the Jesus we pray to at night? Is it really Jesus as revealed to us in the Gospels or simply a projection of our best self, a self justifying image of an exalted ego? It is a good question to ask ourselves as individuals. It is good question to ask ourselves as Church. Here is a good litmus test. If the Jesus we pray to always agrees with us, chances are we are in trouble. It is possible we might as well be praying to a zucchini rather than the Christ of the New Testament. It can be a very healthy spiritual exercise to weigh the image of the Jesus we have in our mind with what is presented to us in the Gospel and in our worship together. A good starting place might be to pick up our bible this week, blow off the dust and start reading it again. Another great idea is to consider participating in our many faith formation programs here at Saint Teresa of Calcutta. We have something for all ages.

Yes, my friends, Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” How do we respond? Jesus is waiting for us to answer, in thought, word and deed. How do we think of Jesus? How do we speak of Jesus? How do we make the world a better place as a disciple of Jesus? How does our belief in a God of love and truth help us become more loving and truthful in the world we find ourselves? I believe this is what St. James was getting at in our second reading when he said, “Faith without work is dead.” A real relationship with Jesus is work. A real relationship with Jesus leads us to salvation.