

24th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Who Do You Say That I Am”

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It seems like every Christmas or Easter a popular magazine or television show will make the claim that they can tell us who the historical Jesus was. Have you seen that? Next time you are at Barnes and Noble, here is a fun activity. Flip through any book or article about Jesus written by any contemporary author. It won't take long before you notice that the Jesus depicted in the book or magazine looks a lot like the person writing it. If you are a democrat, clearly Jesus is a democrat. If you are a republican, clearly Jesus is a republican. If a zucchini wrote a book about Jesus, Jesus would be a zucchini. We sinners have a bad habit of only approaching Jesus in ways that makes us the most comfortable, listening the bits we like and discarding what makes us uneasy. We can all be guilty of it at times. Judging by our Gospel reading today, even the disciples often fell into that trap. It is amazing when you think about it. The disciples lived with Jesus, day in and day out. Some thought he was another John the Baptist, others thought he was another Elijah, and still others one of the prophets. They were all wrong, reading into Jesus what they themselves wanted to see.

Jesus asks the disciples “who do people say that I am?” And the disciples don't know. Jesus then presses them with a more haunting question, “but who do you say that I am?” When it gets right down to it, this is perhaps the single most important question Jesus will ever ask us. What is your answer? Peter responded, “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 at that moment, 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 clearly not on the same page at that present moment of what being the Christ meant. It really 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.” Being the Christ didn't mean being a secular king or 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.”

My friends, what if Jesus is asking us individually today: “who do you say that I am?” I invite us all to answer honestly because, like I said, if we call ourselves Christians, our answer to that question is critically important. The answer to that question colors how we view our world and our place in it. It is healthy every so often to do a spiritual audit to discern whether my answer to the question “who is Jesus?” is different when I am here at church than when I am at home with my family. Is my answer to the question, “who is Jesus?” different at home with my family than when I am at work or at 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 brings out a bag of 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 disciples outside these doors.

Let me offer a poignant example. Like many of you, I’ll never forget that day twenty years ago when the world changed forever on September 11th. It was a Tuesday. I was opening the door of my car to enjoy my day off when I heard neighbors in the street nearby talking about plains crashing. I decided to go back inside my house and turn on the news to see what they were talking about. The shock of it all was paralyzing. My “day off” was obviously canceled. Instead, I went over to the church, opened the doors and began to pray. Other people had the same idea, and soon I wasn’t alone. What I remember most about that week however were the readings for the Sunday following 9/11. The first reading was from Sirach, “Anger and wrath are hateful things. The sinner hugs them tight”. The Gospel reading recalled Peter asking Jesus the question, “How often am I to forgive? Seven times?” And Jesus answered, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” Judging by the anger in the hearts of so many of us that week, the Jesus we encountered in the Gospel reading wasn’t the Jesus people really wanted at that moment. The idea of forgiveness couldn’t be further from people’s minds. And yet, the Gospel reading that weekend invited us to encounter the real Jesus, even though it was inconvenient, even though his words challenged us to the core.

What if Jesus is asking you today: “Who do you say that I am?” Like I said, this might be the most important question Jesus will ever ask you. What is your answer? Here is a good litmus test. If the Jesus we pray to always agrees with us, chances are we have missed the mark. We might as well be praying to a zucchini rather than the real Jesus of the New Testament. We can avoid this by picking up our bible this week and encounter Jesus again as we prayerfully read the Gospels. Another great idea is to consider participating in our many faith formation programs here at Saint Vincent de Paul. We have Grape Vine for our younger kids starting up and Sacramental Preparation for all ages, a wonderful Catholic School, and the list goes on. We will also be starting a new program next month on select Wednesdays throughout the year called Revival. It started out as a program to help our Middle School and High School youth prepare for the Sacrament of Confirmation and has since evolved into what can become a mid-week retreat experience for all of us. We sent out an email to our mailing list on Friday with more details. Please check it out. It’s exciting. The point is, even though we still have to be careful with Covid 19, we will still have something for all ages here at St. Vincent de Paul. All of it will help you and your family grow in your relationship with Jesus. Please consider it.

Yes, my friends, Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” How do we respond? Jesus is waiting for us to answer. 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? You see, with everything the world is dealing with at present, I believe now more than ever you and I need to encounter Jesus. The whole Church needs to stay close to Jesus, as a People of God and as individual disciples living out our vocations. 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.” What he means by that is, a real relationship with Jesus is work. A real relationship with Jesus offers us salvation.