

Who Do You Say That I Am?

Do you remember when you were in school and the teacher would stand at the front of the class and ask a question and look for someone to answer? Often, the question was a difficult one and the answer was not obvious. So you found yourself developing a fascination with some lint on the sleeve of your sweater or a textbook that still gave out a loud ‘crack’ when opened would become as interesting as the latest comic book; anything to avoid eye contact with the teacher.

The longer the teacher waited, the more uncomfortable the situation became. Everyone was hoping and praying that the teacher would not single them out to deliver the answer. No one wanted to risk the ridicule of classmates by venturing a wrong answer.

In the Gospel for this Sunday (Matt. 16: 13-20), Jesus takes the disciples away by themselves and questions them. He begins by asking: ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’

This is an easy question for them because they only have to report what other people are saying. So they respond by telling Jesus that people are calling Him John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.

But then Jesus puts them on the spot. He asks them the ‘hard’ question: ‘But who do you say that I am?’ The Gospel does not tell us whether most of the disciples gave an answer or whether they started shuffling their feet and looking away. But Peter blurted out: ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’

Where did this come from? Clearly Peter did not know the mission of Jesus because Jesus would soon tell him to get behind me, Satan! And Peter would deny Jesus even after saying that he would not.

Peter was a simple fisherman. He did not appear to have the qualities of leadership to initiate and nurture a brand new undertaking; one that would change the world. But, in spite of Peter’s weaknesses, Jesus chose him to lead the Church and to make it grow. He gave Peter the ultimate teaching authority in the Church and the ability to render binding decisions, the authority to include or exclude members of the religious community, and the authority to forgive sins. Jesus transferred His own authority over the Kingdom of Heaven to Peter.

Why would He do this knowing Peter’s characteristics? Well, St. Paul, in the Second Reading (Rom. 11: 33-36) gives us some understanding. He wrote this about God: ‘How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord?’ Who knows why Jesus did what He did. We do not know how God thinks. God’s ways are not our ways.

But this serves to give us confidence. We can rest in the knowledge that God does not see us as others would or even how we would see ourselves. He looks beyond our human frailties and sins and sees us as the glorious beings that He created. He sees us not only for who we are but also for what we can be.

When we consider Christ’s question: ‘Who do you say I am?’, we also have to answer the question: ‘Who am I and what is my mission?’ Let us trust in God and let Him work in our lives without thinking of our sins and failings. Let us not be afraid to make eye contact with Jesus and to tell Him that we are prepared to follow Him anywhere.