

The gospels record several very pointed, poignant, and powerful questions that Jesus asked of those around him. A number of them will be heard during Cycle C when we spend time as a Church in the Gospel of Luke. Consider Luke 18:8—“When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” Or again, Luke 6:46—“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and not do what I tell you?” And from this Sunday’s Gospel of Luke, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” and “Who do you say that I am?”

Dangerous questions, all of them, because they unrelentingly cut to the core of our relationship with the divine.

Thomas Merton once remarked that we should never underestimate our ability to deceive ourselves.

And so the question of who the crowd says Jesus is... has not lost its relevance, even today, precisely because so many miss the mark.

There’s the Republican Jesus who is against tax increases and activists judges, and for family values.

There’s Democrat Jesus who is against Wall Street and Wal-Mart and all for reducing our carbon footprint.

There’s Therapist Jesus who helps us cope with life’s problems, heals our past, tells us how valuable we are and not to be so hard on ourselves.

There’s Starbuck’s Jesus who drinks fair trade coffee, loves spiritual conversations, and drives a hybrid.

There’s Open-minded Jesus who loves everyone all the time no matter what, except for people who are not as open-minded as we are, of course.

There’s Touchdown Jesus who helps athletes fun faster and jump higher.

There’s Gentle Jesus who is meek and mild, with high cheek bones, flowing hair, and walks around barefoot, wearing a sash and a white robe and looking very European.

There’s Hippie Jesus who teaches everyone to give peace a chance, and helps us remember all you need is love.

There's Yuppie Jesus who encourages us to find our full potential, reach for the stars, and trust Him to pick our lotto numbers.

There's Spirituality Jesus who hates religion, churches, and doctrine; and would rather have people out in nature, finding the god within and listening to ambiguously spiritual musical.

There's Platitude Jesus, good for Christmas specials, greeting cards, and bad sermons.

There's Revolutionary Jesus who teaches us to rebel against the status quo.

There's Guru Jesus, a wise, inspirational teacher who believes in us and helps us find our center.

There's Good Example Jesus who shows you how to help people, change the planet, and become a better you.

Of course, that was all said "tongue in cheek", however, it is also a fairly accurate, though hardly exhaustive, overview of "Who the crowds say Jesus is". We know that we all canand often do... see Jesus as a "soft Messiah." And there is certainly nothing wrong in that.

It's very comforting to know Him as a friend and companion, someone to help us bear or sufferings and our many crosses. But Jesus asks more of us, doesn't He? We read it; we hear it and we sense it, that Jesus wants to be more than a friend and comforter.

(Short pause)

Today's Gospel invites us to "take up our crosses and FOLLOW HIM... the Jesus Christ of scripture and of our Faith, the Christ of God..... Not just another prophet. Not just another Rabbi. He is the Living Word of God.

Not just another wonder-worker. He is the one to heal the sick, give sight to the blind, freedom to the prisoners and proclaim the good news to the poor. He is the Lion of Judah and the Sacrificial Lamb of God comes to take away the sins of the world.

This Jesus is the Creator come to earth.... and the beginning of a new creation. He embodies the covenant, fulfills the commandments, and reverses the curse of original sin.

This Jesus is the Christ that God spoke of to the serpent in Eden, the Christ prefigured to Noah in the flood, the Christ vowed to Abraham, the Christ guaranteed to Moses before he died, the Christ promised to David when he was king, the Christ revealed to Isaiah and Zechariah as a suffering servant, the Christ predicted through the prophets and the Christ prepared for through John the Baptist.

This Christ **is not** a reflection of the *current mood of the crowd* or the projection of our own desires. He **is** Lord and God. He is the Father's Son, Savior of the world, and bearer of our sins—more loving, more holy, more perfect and more wonderfully, beautifully terrifying than we ever thought possible. This is the Christ in which all time is reckoned and whom no time can contain. **This** is "the Christ of God" that Peter proclaimed.

(PAUSE)

And so, whoever takes these questions, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" and "Who do YOU say that I am?" will find themselves examining the popular notions of who He is and examining our own hearts for who we believe Him to be.

It is risky business....examining the thoughts and intentions of our hearts....allowing the word of God—the questions of Jesus— to do their work in us.

Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" is an invitation to take personally and seriously the possibility that maybe **we need** to see him differently.

It is an invitation to take personally and seriously the necessity to stop taking refuge in the answers of others and to answer for ourselves. It is an invitation to stand as existentially naked as we are able before the one in whom our existence takes on new meaning.

(PAUSE)

Peter hardly understood what he was saying when he made His statement of Faith for his Faith was still in its infancy. He would continue to struggle with the words and actions of Jesus, which often challenged his own beliefs and instincts. He would be frustrated, he would say the wrong thing, and he would miss the point. And finally, in what would be the darkest moment of his life, he would deny that he even knew Jesus.

Peter and the other disciples... and all the Saints to follow... would become men and women of faith only after they encountered the risen Lord. We are no different.

Only when Christ passes through the locked doors of our upper room will He be understood, only when we've touched the nail prints in his hands by passing through our own illnesses and sufferings can we know the **power** that the Resurrection holds over death. Only when we come to this altar, in all our humanity, broken and healed, sorrowful and grateful, can we too truly "see Him" in the breaking of the bread. Only when we carry the cross of our Christian duty to self and to others can we glory in the Cross of Christ. Only after we have been transformed by his resurrection can we profess that He is truly the Son of God.

But how is it that we mortals come to have an intimate understanding of so awesome a God? We do it first in our "human-ness" and then, eventually, in light of whom He really is.

In all aspects of our life, whether it be politics or sports or even entertainment, we start with the popular notions, but in and through our lived faith, we come to see Jesus differently.

The Jesus I came to know when I was raising my girls, or living with cancer, or getting married, is no different than the Jesus I know today...however the experience of raising them, passing through the disease and growing in love and faithfulness to Judy have brought me to a deeper understanding of who Jesus is. However, without a personal desire for Christ, those events could have been spiritually neutral.

Was Jesus a friend in all of this....yes, but He became a more intimate friend when I allowed Him to challenge me. Did He act as therapist....you bet, but He also showed me areas where I was responsible.

To my regret, there were also times and events, I let pass by without consideration to Jesus.

I expect that I will face more suffering as well as many blessings in the years to come. I ask for the grace to see Jesus in all of them.

I also fully expect that, this side of Heaven, I will never completely know Him, but I will come to know Him more completely.

“Who do you say that I am?”

My answer? If asked today I would have to say to Him:

“You are the One in Whom I am loved, and in Whom I am called to love.”

However, my answer as.... well as yours... for tomorrow is not yet known.