

Mark 8:27-35, 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B, September 15th & 16th, 2018

I believe that today's Gospel is an important one for us and for all those who are trying to live out the Christian life because in it Jesus gives us a lesson on discipleship, a lesson more specifically about what it means to be His disciple. I think it is helpful to understand just how important a decision it was to become someone's disciple in the ancient world. In his book, "The Case for Jesus", Dr. Pitre makes the point that *"Although nowadays we tend to use the word 'disciple' to refer to a 'believer,' in the first century AD, it literally meant 'student'. Being a student in the ancient world was radically different from what it is like today when it simply means you may or may not listen to a fifty-minute lecture three times a week for a semester. Being one of Jesus's students meant following him everywhere and listening to him all the time, for anywhere between one and three years."*¹

Jesus begins His lesson on discipleship by asking the question, *"Who do men say that I am?"* This is, of course, a very intriguing question. It is also a somewhat unusual question. For instance, if I were to have said to Fr. Glenn, before Mass, "Fr. Glenn who do men say that I am?" He would think I was crazy, at least crazier than usual, and he would be right. Why would Jesus ask this question? Of course, I don't know exactly, but maybe He wants to see how His mission is going, getting a kind of status update, if you will. He has gathered His disciples and has been ministering, among the people. They have heard His preaching - heard His authoritative, powerful, and challenging interpretation of the Scriptures; they have witnessed His incredible healing powers: raging fevers have been broken, those who were paralyzed now walk, lepers have been cleansed, the deaf's ears have been opened and the mute can now speak, demons have

¹ Pitre, The Case for Jesus, p. 87

been cast out. They have seen supernatural miracles: storms were calmed, Jesus walked on water, thousands were fed from only a few loaves and a couple of fish. Maybe Jesus wants to know how His message is being perceived among the people, or maybe He wants to draw His disciples into a deeper realization of who He is and what He has come to do.

His disciples reply that people are perceiving Him as a prophet, which is true. Certainly, people recognized a holiness in John the Baptist, in his rejection of worldly goods and his fearless proclamation of God's truth, and they see that same holiness in Jesus, but still there is so much more. Being compared to Elijah, one of Israel's greatest prophets, is again on the right track, there is a recognition of His holiness, of a unique closeness to God, but this is not quite the answer Jesus is looking for. And so, Jesus personalizes the question. He looks at each of them, and asks this great question, "*But who do you say that I am?*". This is the great question of the Gospels. This question is the hinge on which the Gospels turn. All those things that Jesus has done up to this point in time witness to His unique and mysterious connection to God. The calming of the seas and the walking on the water – only God has that kind of power over nature. The genuine forgiveness of sins committed against others – only God can truly forgive sins. The authoritative teaching and intuitive interpretation of the Scriptures as if he somehow knew the mind of God. The healing of lepers, the paralyzed, the possessed, and even the raising of the dead, all point to Jesus' unique identity as the Christ, the anointed one of God.

Peter is the one to finally provide the answer that Jesus has been hoping to draw out from them. Today's reading is from Mark's Gospel and Mark just gives us the facts. In the parallel passage in Matthew's Gospel, we hear Peter's full confession, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*", which is followed by Jesus' confirmation that Peter has answered correctly, "*Blessed are you Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.*" This is the answer that changes everything. This answer

means that the eternal, almighty, all-knowing God and Creator of the universe has somehow entered into human history at a particular time, 2000 years ago, at a particular place, walking amidst the villages of Cesaria Phillipi, for a particular purpose, to carry out His Father's will, to save fallen human beings from slavery to sin and death. God has somehow become human in the person of Jesus the Christ.

Peter's answer means that everything Jesus says and does is said and done by God. Every word He speaks tells us something about what we are supposed to do and how we are supposed to live. In Jesus Christ, we have the interpretive key to the meaning of our existence and to our ultimate destiny. Peter's answer is the answer Jesus wanted to draw out of His disciples then and it is the same answer He seeks from His disciples today. But be careful now, we are moving into dangerous waters. I urge you to approach Jesus's question with care, because the way you answer this question today, may change your life, and you need to know what you are getting into.

Jesus then unfolds and explains His message to His disciples. And the first thing He tells them is not to tell anyone. Bible scholars call this the "Messianic secret". There are a number of theories about why Jesus is constantly performing miracles for people, and in this case, reveals His divinity to them, and then tells them not to tell anyone about it. The best explanation that I have heard is that Jesus wants to allow time for His Father's saving plan to come to fruition, and he doesn't want people getting carried away with the idea of making Him an earthly king.

Jesus then begins to tell them that He must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. This is all just too much for Peter and he rebukes Jesus. We don't know what Peter actually said to Jesus, but based on Jesus' strong reaction to his words, whatever he said must have been a real temptation. Obviously, Jesus knows what His Father is asking Him to do – He just told His

disciples all about what is going to happen. Maybe Peter was trying to reason with Jesus. Maybe he was telling him to think of all the good that He could do if He would just turn away from the Cross. Think of all the people He could heal and all the demons that would be cast out. Think about how much good He could bring about if only He would not do what His Father was asking Him to do. Jesus' rebuke, "*Get behind me, Satan,*" shows that He recognizes His enemy working through Peter. Satan is always using any means he can find, including the good intentions of a close friend, to turn us away from doing the Father's will.

Jesus next tells His disciples what they should expect, what they are going to have to do if they are going to continue to follow Him. This is where we need to be very careful because the criteria for discipleship has not changed in 2000 years. Jesus tells them then, and us today, if we are going to be His followers, we will need to deny ourselves, pick up our Cross, and follow Him. He is telling us we will have to become like Him. It means we must stop being selfish and self-serving and begin to learn the way of self-giving and sacrifice. It means we must stop doing what Peter tried to do; stop trying to make God do what we want and start accepting His will in our lives. This means we will have to follow Jesus' example of obedient and sacrificial love, start living Jesus' way, the way that leads to the Cross.

This is why I am asking you to approach Jesus's question very carefully because there is no going halfway with Jesus. Jesus doesn't just want to be part of your life, He wants to be the center of your life. Jesus didn't die on the Cross so that we could become "Cultural Catholics²", giving the bare minimum of ourselves, so we can say we checked off some box, that says we are good Catholics. Jesus wants all of our hearts, all of our minds, and all of our lives, because that is what He gave for us, and that is what it means to follow Him, what it means to be His disciple.

² Archbishop Jose Gomez, paraphrased

I feel I need to say something to you about the terrible crisis our Church is facing because of the wicked and evil behavior of some of our clergy, even to the highest levels of our Church. Fr. Glenn has mentioned it and written well about it. I know that many of you, who love the Church, are devastated, discouraged, angry, and hurt to see the Church you love being dragged through the mud because some of the men, who are supposed to be leading us on this path of discipleship, have betrayed you. They have used the goodwill of God's people, directed toward those who are good and holy priests, please remember, that is the vast majority of our priests, they have used that good will as a cover for enabling them to live a double life. During the day they are serving at the Altar of Sacrifice and at night they are abusing, mostly it is young men, for their sexual pleasure. They have not denied themselves, they have not picked up their cross, they are not following Jesus, they are betraying Him, and they are betraying you, who trusted them to be looking out for your salvation. What is even more disturbing is that many others in the hierarchy knew exactly what was going on, and either didn't care enough or were too afraid, to do anything about it. What I guess I want to say to you is that you do have every right to be angry, you have every right to demand transparency in our Church and justice for those who were victimized.

What I hope you can and will take from today is that it is Jesus who is asking you the question, "*Who do you say that I am?*" He is the one who is seeking your answer. He is the one who wants to be the center of your life. He is the one who is calling you to follow Him. The Scriptures tell us not to put our hope in princes, in men where there is no help (Psalm 146:3). Your faith needs to be grounded on the Rock who is Jesus, the one who promised to always be with His Church, even in difficult times, the one who promised His Church would withstand the gates of Hell, the one who is calling you to follow Him, the one who is the Christ, the one who is the Son of the Living God.