

'Who do you say I am?'

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Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 22:19-23

Psalms 138

Romans 11:33-36

Matthew 16:13-20

Talk about being put on the spot! How rare and potentially embarrassing is it to have a friend look you in the eye and ask, “What do you think of me?” How are we supposed to approach that question? We might hide behind the details that belong in a résumé, mentioning professional, social or athletic accomplishments. Getting a little more personal, we could refer to the person’s qualities and remain on the superficial level of adjectives like “nice, good-looking, strong” or venture into more relational descriptions

such as “my friend, my beloved, my hero.” That’s pretty much the disciples’ challenge in today’s Gospel.

Jesus led his friends away from their normal stomping grounds and then started to ask questions that, ultimately, led them to explain who they themselves were as they continued to follow his lead.

When Jesus asked, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” he started innocently enough by getting them to report on what they were hearing about him. In the days before Twitter or NPR, their grapevine relied on what they picked up at synagogue patios and city gates, plus a little of what the women heard around the town well. Without naming their blowhard source, their first answer cited Herod’s phobic notion that Jesus might be John the Baptist back from the dead. Then, they added popular opinions that identified him with Elijah or another of the prophets. What kind of look did Jesus give the disciples as they recited the names of the long-deceased people he was rumored to impersonate?

Then, yanking them right out of the role of impartial reporting, Jesus put them on the witness stand by asking one direct question: “But who do you say that I am?” One can imagine that the ground beneath their feet suddenly seemed fascinating as they pondered how to respond. Peter eventually spoke up. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

That was a great answer and so open-ended that he could hardly have been wrong.

The title “Christ” simply means “anointed.” It could refer to a Hebrew king, a priest, a prophet or even a foreigner like Cyrus the Persian. It clearly conveyed the idea that Jesus was God’s agent, but whether or not he was a savior or what kind of a savior he might be, was anything but obvious

Theological precision aside, Peter’s statement in the name of the group effectively declared that their relationship with Jesus was the commitment that defined their lives. When Jesus responded, “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you,” he acknowledged that he saw God’s grace at work in Peter. Building on the Father’s affirmation of him at his baptism, this interaction assured Jesus not only that he was God’s beloved, but that his mission would find a home and a future among his disciples. While their faith was not yet resilient enough to withstand the storms to come and still needed much clarification, it was enough to build on. In fact, Jesus proclaimed that it was strong enough that the netherworld could not overcome it.

By calling Jesus the Son of God, Peter had desacralized the Roman Empire's claims about the divinity of Caesar and the validity of his rule. When Jesus gave Peter the "power of the keys," he was delegitimizing the religious elite who claimed the exclusive right to interpret the Mosaic Law. The disciples had seen Jesus "loose" the laws of Sabbath and purity; now he was sharing that responsibility with them. In giving Peter and his church the keys to the kingdom of heaven, Jesus gave them the responsibility to open doors as he had done throughout his ministry. While the official religious authorities were often quick to decide who was in and who was out, Jesus excluded no one but rather mourned the plight of those who excluded themselves by rejecting the gifts he offered.

When we read this story as a dialog about apostolic dedication, we begin to comprehend what it means for the church today. Those of us who make bold to stand with Peter and say, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," are making a commitment and receiving a vocation. We are consecrating ourselves to worship no god but God, to abjure all the idols of power and prestige that marginalize God's little ones. We are joining with Jesus, the disciples and prophets in the mission to use every key we can get our hands on to free prisoners and to fling open the doors of full access to the goods of creation for each and every daughter and son of the living God.

Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" may make us uncomfortable. It also turns the tables and asks us, "Who do you say you are?"