

Twenty First Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 27, 2017

The most important question in the whole world is the one Jesus asks in today's gospel: "Who do you say that I am?" The answer to that question—our honest belief about the identity of Jesus—is the very heart of Catholic and Christian faith.

We have all heard countless homilies about the identity of Jesus and I imagine that we know this passage from Matthew pretty well. But the subject has to be addressed repeatedly because it's simply that the identity of Jesus is the key to everything.

As the Gospel passage indicates, the people in the region of Caesarea Philippi 2,000 years ago had many views about Jesus' identity: "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

People in today's world also have many ideas about Jesus' identity. If you go to a shopping mall and randomly ask people who Jesus is, people will give all sorts of answers.

Some say he was this really cool dude who preached peace and love; others will say he's one of many founders of popular religions; and still others will claim that he is nothing more than the figment of someone's troubled imagination.

And this is nothing new. Throughout history, people have attempted to answer this question. It could actually be said that the whole of Christian history, the heresies, the councils, the Reformation, are nothing more than exercises in answering Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?"

Today it's popular for people to simply make something up, to make of Jesus whatever occurs to them that is convenient or believable or politically correct. Perhaps C.S. Lewis put it

best in his little book, *Mere Christianity*: "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher.

He'd be either a lunatic- on a level with a man who says he's a poached egg - or else he'd be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse....But don't let us come up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He hasn't left that open to us. He didn't intend to."

So our answer to the question, "Who do you say that I am?" is crucial because our own identity and vocation depend on how we respond. If we are still not sure who Jesus is, then our own life of faith hasn't really begun.

If we think, as many do, that Jesus was only a good person, even a great person, then everything else the Church believes about him — his redemptive death on the cross and his resurrection to glory, his identity as Messiah and Son of God, as the One who gives us eternal life through baptism and by sharing himself with us in the Eucharist — is not being fully incorporated into our personal identity as a believer.

The key to today's Gospel is the knowledge that faith is not automatic, nor is it just a matter of knowing the catechism. Peter gives us a good example of how to come to faith in Jesus. Peter spent time with Jesus in a human way *first*, experiencing his company, following him, watching what he did, listening to what he said, noting how other people reacted to him.

Then he reflected deeply and prayed on the question of who Jesus was. And then, when the question was posed to him directly, Peter had still not figured it out by himself, but he was open to the gift of faith. We know that because Jesus tells him, "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father."

So if we are to follow Peter's example, we too must come to know Jesus first in a human way. We read the scriptures, listen to homilies, see how other believers, especially the saints of history and the saints we know in our own lives, respond to him and live their lives in faith.

We let the story of his life take root in our imaginations; we ask questions, try to resolve our doubts, seek the support of others in a community that celebrates the mystery of Jesus. In doing all of this we're opening our hearts to receive the gift of faith.

And then, like Peter, we have some degree of relationship with Jesus when the question is posed for us intimately and decisively. "Who do you say that I am?" And that question may make us a little uncomfortable. Because it also forces us to ask an equally important question: "Who do we say we are?"