

24 Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 17, 2006

Readings: Is. 50:4-9; Ps. 116; Jas. 2:14-18; Mk. 8:27-35

Today's gospel touches on the central meaning of our Christian faith. Jesus asks his disciples "Who do people say that I am?" Some respond: John the Baptist come back among us. Others say: Elijah, whom the Old Testament promised would return in the messianic age, or one of the prophets. Jesus then asks, "But who do *you* say that I am?" Peter rightly answers "You are the Christ"—the messiah—who is to bring salvation to Israel.

Jesus's question, "Who do *you* say that I am?" is addressed not only to the original disciples, but to us also. Each of us must answer this question, not just once, but amid all the challenges of our lives.

Let me tell you about my own efforts to answer. September 8 is the anniversary of my becoming a Jesuit. As I was reflecting on the readings for that day, two aspects of my own answer to Jesus question came into focus. One reading proclaimed that Jesus is the "sun of justice." Jesus is like a radiant star whose enlightening beams that will dispel the shadows of injustice that darken our world. I thought of the very poor refugees I have known during my times of teaching in eastern Africa. I remembered a woman who was unfairly fired from her job. So I was filled with hope when I heard Jesus called "Sun of justice" I want to answer Jesus question: you are the one who brings the light of justice into this darkness.

Jesus's question also reminds me of another passage from my anniversary day liturgy, in which the prophet Isaiah points to the coming messiah and says "he shall be peace." The messiah's glowing message of love will melt the frozen hearts that are the source of all our conflicts. It raises real hope that Jesus can bring peace to the tormented lands of Iraq and Lebanon, and Sudan. It leads to a trust that Jesus can soothe the tormented spirit of a close friend who suffers from life-long mental illness. Christ's healing grace can bring reconciliation to our divided world and real peace to the spirits of so many who desperately need it.

Radiant Sun of justice, source of peace to the ends of the earth! These are surely right ways to answer Jesus's question "who do you say I am?" You are the source of our hope for a more just world. You are the basis of our belief that troubled souls and our divided world can come to new peace. No doubt Peter was thinking like this when he said: You are the Messiah, and he was right to do so.

But there is a hitch. Jesus's further words suggest that Peter had the wrong idea about the kind of Messiah Jesus was. Along with some of his Jewish contemporaries, Peter apparently imagined that Jesus would be a powerful military hero or a political liberator who would set Israel free from imperial control by Rome. What Peter (and we) had to learn was that Jesus came to be a suffering Messiah, one who can only be understood in light of the mystery of the cross. The kind of messiah Jesus is "must suffer greatly, be rejected by the elders,

be killed and rise on the third day.” Peter doesn’t like this at all. He tells Jesus this is not the way it should be. Jesus’s response is abrupt: Peter, you are not thinking as God does, but as humans do. Very sharp words to the first pope.

What can these words about a suffering messiah mean? They do not mean that God wants injustice, or lack of peace, or suffering. I think they do mean that the kind of messiah that Jesus is brings salvation by himself undergoing the struggles and anguish of our world. This messiah’s identification with us is so deep that he shares the suffering of the refugees I have known in Africa. This messiah feels deep in his own heart the anguish and torment of my friend who has suffered mental illness through his whole life. Jesus Christ will bring salvation to both the refugee and the mentally ill because their suffering has touched his heart and become his own suffering. This messiah is our companion, not only in victory over injustice or conflict, but in the midst of injustice and conflict.

We can be grateful that this messiah is not a like a lord and master removed from the anguish of our world, but a true companion who shares our struggles. Let’s give thanks for that in this eucharist, where we are invited to be companions—to share bread—both with Jesus our messiah and with all those in our world who suffer. As companions with them, we are also invited to work to work for the justice and the peace we all long for.