

Second Sunday of ordinary time, Year A, 2008

Readings: Isaiah 49:3, 5-6, 1 Corinthians 1:1-3, John 1:29-34

Who Is this Jesus?

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Today's gospel passage is from the beginning of John's gospel. It raises a question that John asks throughout his writing. Just who is this Jesus? This was a key question for Jesus's first followers. And it is for us Christians today too, and for anyone who wonders what to make of the Christian story. Who Is this Jesus? Before we decide whether we really believe in him or could even consider believing in him, we need to ask who we think he is.

This question runs all through John's gospel. Just before the passage we read today, a group of people encounter John the Baptist. John is calling them to change their way of living. Before responding, they ask: Who ARE you? Who are you to tell us how to live? John answers by saying: I am not the Messiah. I am just pointing the way for the one who can really answer your deepest questions, who can truly show you what it all means. And in the passage following today's reading, several followers of John the Baptist are intrigued when they first meet Jesus. When Jesus sees the questions written on their faces, he turns to them with a question of his own: "What are you looking for?" These are the very first words of Jesus recorded in John's gospel. They are addressed to us as well as to the first

Christians: What are you looking for? The philosopher Immanuel Kant once wrote that there are three central questions of our entire human existence: What can I believe? What should I do? And what can I hope for? Jesus knows these questions are in the heart of the two who are wondering whether to follow him. So he invites them: Come and see! Come and listen! I will help you answer your deepest questions. I will help you see what you can ultimately believe in or trust, what you should do with your lives, and what you can hope for.

Today's gospel records for us in a very compressed form two of the answers people reached when they went and saw who Jesus actually is. The Baptist gives us the first of these answers when he points to Jesus and declares: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." These familiar, but obscure words echo the Old Testament account of the Passover. The Israelites enslaved in Egypt slaughtered lambs in sacrifice and put the blood on their doorposts. Seeing the blood, God passed over them while slaying their oppressors the Egyptians. The paschal lamb is thus the sign of the liberating action of God setting the Israelites free from bondage. Isaiah extends this image in the great servant song that we hear on Good Friday. For Isaiah, the lamb brings not only liberation from slavery but release from sin. The lamb "was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities." "By his bruises we have been healed."

So the first answer to the question “who are you” is that Jesus is the Lamb of God who gives his very life to bring freedom to people who are oppressed or victims of injustice. This lamb gives its life rather than demanding that those who do injustice be punished. This Lamb brings forgiveness, and thus takes away the sins of the world. When John the Baptist calls Jesus the Lamb of God, it reminds me of one of Jesus’s own answers to the question “who are you?” If you come and see, you will see someone who loves you so much that he will lay down his life for you. In Jesus’ words: “Greater love has no one than to lay down his life for his friends” Think of Martin Luther King, struggling against injustice, bringing freedom to his people, and in the end laying down his life for his friends.

But John’s gospel goes even further than the Dr. King analogy in its second answer to who Jesus is. Jesus’ love goes beyond that of a heroic though surely imperfect human like King. John tells us that if you come and see who Jesus is, you will discover he is more than a great hero. He is the Son of God. His love is God’s unconditional love, for you, for me, for every human person, including the sinners. John the evangelist tells us he wrote his gospel so we may believe Jesus is the Son of God, and thus have life in him. Who Is This Jesus? He is one whose love for us is so unconditional that we can only call it divine. Jesus brings utterly unconditional love into our world—for you and for me. He is Emmanuel—God with us; God’s total love with and for us. If we come to see that in Jesus, we will

be filled with hope and joy. Life, not death, is our ultimate destiny. Let's pray that we can believe that more deeply as we come to Jesus at the table of the Eucharist.

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