

21st Sunday (A)

- Picture the scene of today's Gospel - Jesus has been leading & teaching his disciples for almost three years; he has healed, challenged, forgiven & revealed something of the heart of God.
- Now he wants to know whether his message has really touched them.
- Do those closest to him really understand what he is about? Have they come to know who he truly is? So he asks: *"Who do people say I am?"*
- The disciples give him the answers they have heard from others: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets, but Jesus then comes to what he really wants to know: *"But you - who do you say I am?"*
- The disciples have lived with Jesus; they have seen what he does & heard what he teaches; they have experienced his compassion, his challenge, his freedom & his extraordinary intimacy with people.
- And Peter, reflecting on all of this, makes the great profession of faith: *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*
- Peter is recognising Jesus as the revelation of God for the world.
- This is not simply the right answer to a religious examination; it is a conviction of the heart, born from relationship, experience & encounter.
- Peter has come to recognise something in Jesus that cannot be reduced to a collection of teachings or ideas.
- 2,000 years later, we continue to profess Peter's faith whenever we stand together & say the Creed, but the remarkable thing about today's Gospel is that Jesus does not allow us simply to repeat Peter's answer; he asks the question of us: *"Who do you say that I am?"* And what was true for Peter is true for us.
- At some point, if our faith is to move beyond simply observing religious practices, following a code of law, or holding certain ideas about God, we have to take the faith of the Church - which has nurtured us - & make it our own.
- We have to encounter Christ for ourselves; & when we do, we contribute to the re-founding of the Church in our own generation.
- Simply being part of the "Catholic crowd" is hardly the challenge Jesus places before his disciples.
- We do not all have exactly the same image of Jesus - his personality is inexhaustible, & each of us encounters him through our own experiences, questions, hopes, fears, relationships, background & religious formation.
- Consequently, the image of Jesus we carry has enormous importance because it shapes the way we understand our faith & the way we live it.
- And if we are genuinely in relationship with Jesus, our image of him cannot remain exactly what it was ten or twenty years ago.
- As we grow, suffer, love, question, fail, forgive & discover, our understanding of Christ should deepen; so the question remains the same, but our answer should mature. So how would you answer Jesus today?
- Because the answer we give says something profound about us.
- If we merely give the stock-standard answer we learnt at school, if our childhood image of Jesus has remained untouched because we have never

allowed him to engage the more serious questions of adulthood, or if our image of him has become distorted by our fears & prejudices, then perhaps our faith has not been allowed to mature.

- Unfortunately, it is possible to be religious without ever allowing ourselves a living encounter with Jesus.
- We can know a great deal *about* him without actually knowing him.
- We can hold on to faith because it is familiar, because it belongs to our family or culture, or because we are afraid to examine it too seriously.
- Perhaps we stopped asking questions because we were afraid the questions might change us.
- But knowing things about Jesus does not necessarily make us Christian.
- Christianity is ultimately about relationship with the living Christ.
- This is one of the deepest purposes of Catholic education: not simply to pass on religious information, but to foster in young people a living relationship with Jesus which can become the ground on which they live their lives & the foundation from which they face whatever the future brings; & that relationship grows when we become attentive to the ways Christ continues to encounter us - in the ordinary experiences of our lives, in our relationships, in moments of joy & turmoil, in people who challenge us, & in the great social & environmental struggles of our world.
- Jesus is there, reaching towards us & inviting us to recognise him.
- If we continually miss those encounters, our relationship with him can't develop.
- And this matters profoundly because our relationship with Jesus - & the answer we give to his question - determines the face of Christ we show to others.
- Like the first disciples, we are commissioned to bear witness to Christ's love in our workplaces, our friendships, our families & our parish.
- We should never underestimate this.
- We may be the only face of Catholicism, perhaps even the only face of Christianity, that another person encounters.
- And the way we treat that person may become their experience of Christ & their judgement of the Church.
- Do we bind people up or set them free? Do we make people feel that they belong, or that they are outsiders? Do we make the mercy of Christ tangible, or do we place obstacles in its way?
- The Gospel therefore leaves us with that great question: "*Who do you say that I am?*" How we answer it reveals our relationship with Jesus, but even more importantly, how we live reveals whether we really mean our answer.
- If we truly believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, then that belief must take flesh in the way we live: in the mercy we offer, the justice we pursue, the people we welcome, the wounds we bind & the freedom we give.
- For ultimately, the Christian answer to Jesus' question is not merely something we say; it is something our lives are called to become.