

Go Forth...

A SERVICE OF U.S. CATHOLIC MISSION ASSOCIATION

MISSIONARY COMMENTARY

EXPLORING OUR IDENTITY



SUNDAY READINGS:

Isaiah 22:19-23

Psalms 138:1-3, 6, 8

Romans 11:33-36

Matthew 16:13-20

JESUS ASKS PROBING QUESTIONS

Today's Gospel contains two key questions Jesus asked his disciples; there is also an interesting sequence to the questions. First, Jesus, while in the region of Caesarea Philippi, asks: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

A wide variety of responses follows: (1) John the Baptist [Jesus followed John in his ministry and continued to preach]; (2) Elijah [the way Jesus taught and acted made him a prime candidate for Elijah come-back-to-earth]; and, (3) a prophet of old [Jesus preached repentance and conversion]. All these responses are plausible; yet, they reflect the disciples' rather shallow faith.

Second Question. Jesus then puts a very direct question to his disciples: "Who do **you** [not others, not the crowds] say I am?" What is **your** personal response? Peter replies: "the Christ, the Son of the living God." Then Jesus challenges them to follow him; this means taking up their cross every day.

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Many of us may be more familiar with the Markan version of this same scene. Today's Matthean version skips the narrative where Peter objects to Jesus' prediction of his death. In Mark's version Jesus strongly rebukes Peter, saying: "Get behind me, Satan! Because the way you think is not God's way but only a human way" (Mk 8:31-33).

Same Question. Whatever Gospel version is followed [Mt 16:13-17; Mk 8:27-33; Lk 9:18-24], the core question remains the same: *Who do **you** say I am?* This perennial question is addressed to the disciples of Jesus' time—and to us, his modern-day followers. Who do we say Jesus is—not by our words alone, but by our deeds and life-style?

The authenticity of our lived example of who Jesus is for us can be enhanced if we challenge ourselves with some additional, probing questions. Ask yourself: *Who am I?* This does not refer to your name or biodata. What kind of a person am I? Am I genuinely compassionate, honest, and self-sacrificing? Ask yourself: *Where did I come from?* This does not refer to your biological parents or ethnic origin. Who knit me together, body and soul, in my mother's womb? Finally, ask yourself: *Where am I going?* This means more than your earthly sojourn. What, in God's plan, is my final, eternal destination?

Intimate Connection. Can you grasp the relationship between my series of questions and Jesus' pivotal question: "*Who do **you** say I am?*"? The manner in which we live our lives as Christian disciples is, in fact, our primary answer to Jesus' identity. Now, let us take the very same probing question of the Gospels and turn it around. We might address God our Father in prayer and say: "O Lord, my God, who do **You** say I am?" If **God** were responding, what answer might we expect?

Probably, God would say: "You are my beloved child, my disciple. Through baptism, you are united intimately with me. I know your weaknesses and sins. Follow me *daily* by carrying the cross with me. I am most merciful; I love and forgive you. You are mine."

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NOTES ON THE SUNDAY READINGS:

First Reading: Isaiah 22:19-23

Our first reading comes from the marvelously talented prophet Isaiah (eighth century BC). Here he describes how the premier of the country, Shebna, will be replaced by Eliakim. Some fantastic promises are made about Eliakim; the key of the House of David will be placed on his shoulder. What he opens, no one will shut; what he shuts, no one will open.

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 138:1-3, 6, 8

Today's psalm expresses God's care for his people; the response asserts: "Lord, your love is eternal." Thus, together we proclaim: "I will give thanks to you, O Lord, with all my heart.... I will sing your praise.... I will give thanks to your name, because of your kindness and your truth.... Your kindness, O Lord, endures forever."

Second Reading: Romans 11:33-36

We continue reading Paul's profound letter to the Romans. Paul has affirmed that justification and salvation in Christ are for all, both Jews and Gentiles. The marvelous goodness of God has made all this possible. Paul praises God in a hymn similar to the ending of the Eucharistic Prayer at Mass: "For through him, and with him, and in him, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, for ever and ever."

Gospel: Matthew 16:13-20

A unique fact is that it is only in Matthew's Gospel that the word "Church" is found. Today's passage is foundational for understanding the Church. Jesus promises to build his Church on the rock foundation of Peter, whose very name *petra* means rock. Jesus further promises that Peter will have the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Certainly, for Catholics this passage is most helpful for understanding the papacy.

Notes and Commentary by Maryknoller James H. Kroeger, who recently published three short, meditative books: ► **Living in Joyful Hope**, ► **Exploring Vatican II Treasures**, and ► **A Joyful Journey with Pope Francis** (www.faithalivebooks.com).

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