

# 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year

## Year B

*Christ, Son Of Man.*

*We worship the man Christ, who accepted every weakness of our human condition, renouncing himself and taking up the cross.*

In today's gospel we hear Jesus ask his followers the all-important question, "Who do people say I am?" He asks this of men who, for some three years or so, have been with him day and night, in public and in private; of those to whom he has spoken of great mysteries as yet beyond their understanding.

Whilst they have seen his power over men, and his mastery over evil at first hand, and whereas they recognise something of his divine worth, a hint of his uniqueness and character, all they can say in answering his question is to merely echo the popular opinion of who others say Jesus is. "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah; and others again, one of the prophets". In short, one of the great figures of their faith, come back to life.

These are seemingly odd replies, coming not from raving fanatics, or from over enthusiastic advocates of a wonderworker, but from ordinary, sober people, more than able to judge things for themselves. Even so, each of these depictions, or portrayals, goes some way in acknowledging Jesus' unique status in the eyes of his disciples.

While the other disciples struggle, it is left to Peter's intuitive perception, to give the answer for which Jesus had been waiting: "You are the Christ", or as Matthew has it, "The Messiah"; each meaning 'The Anointed One'.

2000 years later, it is easy for us to underestimate the importance of these words, especially when we compare them with such terms as 'The Son of God', 'The Second Adam', or 'The Logos', which is, 'The Word of God'. However, the true significance of Peter's declaration, his Confession, underlines the fact that even before his Resurrection, Jesus' disciples ranked him above even Abraham or Moses, above David or indeed, any other Old Testament Patriarch, king or prophet.

As the 'Christ', or the 'Messiah', Jesus had a truly unique status as God's accredited representative, his anointed emissary, who was to judge humankind, to deliver his people, and bring the world to God.

Peter may have been a hot-tempered fisherman, but he was also a devout and pious Jew, who knew Jesus was neither a militant anti-Roman nor an apocalyptic figure dropped from the clouds. And to call Jesus, 'Messiah' was to put him in a category above all humanity; to declare him a man among men, who in a mysterious, inexplicable way, somehow corresponded to God himself.

Having said that, as we read on, we are told, somewhat unexpectedly, that Jesus 'gave them strict orders not to tell anyone'. He does not want the title 'Messiah' to be used publicly. And he doesn't refer to himself as such. Rather, he takes the altogether more enigmatic title of 'the Son of Man', as used in the book of Daniel when it talks about the "People of the saints of the Most High", which is to say, 'The Redeemed Community'.

The 'Son of Man' knows that the way to that future glory is through suffering and death. As Isaiah writes, 'It is the path of the Servant of God that the Messiah chooses, as the only way to bring the world back to God', a path that is by necessity overshadowed by the cross.

Jesus elicits Peter's recognition of himself as the Messiah, not for vainglory, or any sense of self-importance, but to show the disciples what he conceives the Messiah's role to be, 'To suffer grievously, to be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and to be put to death'.

Conflicting with Jewish expectations of the Messiah, this was a role far from his disciples' idea of how the Master should come into his own. And it was far from Peter's mind when he made his declaration. In fact, they were so surprised and disturbed at Jesus' words that Peter again speaks out and remonstrates with him. But Jesus retorts and admonishes him sharply: "Get behind me Satan!"

The intensity of this rebuke underlines Jesus' own fears, and it indicates how hard he must have found it to accept what he knew to be the will of God. For him, Peter's voice was the same as the one he resisted on the mountain of temptation. This was the same devil-inspired attraction of short cut success; a short cut his disciples assumed he would take.

Jesus completes their bewilderment when tells them that if they are to follow him, they must also take up their cross and share in his, thus far 'unforeseen' fate. For these earliest followers, Jesus offers death on a cross as the reward of discipleship. But he also assures them that beyond that death lies the only life worth having.

This is not quite what the gospel means for us today, though sadly for some, in other parts of the world, it does mean exactly that. When Jesus asks us to take up our cross and follow him, he doesn't mean that we are to have ourselves nailed to great lumps of wood. The cross he speaks of is the cross of self-submission, and the observance of his Command that we love God and our neighbour.

When we see the human suffering that surrounds us; all the selfishness, and all the hate; the relentless wars, the hunger, and the deprivation plaguing our world, it is all too easy for us to fall into the same error as Jesus' disciples did. Like them, we expect Jesus to wave his mighty arms and put the world to rights, because he can, we also remonstrate with him because he doesn't do as we expect. But this is also to take the devil's part and to tempt him, for like the disciples, we cannot understand. Neither can we know God's plan.

This is not to say that we do not need to pray for the world, or that, like Pontius Pilate, we can wash our hands of its problems. No! What we are called to do, is to take up the cross of Jesus, and follow his example of love.

Jesus makes it quite clear that his own self-giving on the cross is the true, and only, gateway to the life that God meant us to have. When we acknowledge him to be the Messiah, the Christ of God, and follow him in our own self-sacrifice, we gain the key to the kingdom of heaven.

When Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" he is also asking us in our turn;

**"But you... Who do you say I am?"**