

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time

“But you - who do you say I am?” he asked them. Peter said in reply: “The Messiah of God.”...Jesus said to them all: “Whoever wishes to be a follower of mine must deny his very self, take up his cross each day, and follow in my steps.”

Luke 9, 18-24

Today’s gospel is an invitation to each of us to put ourselves in the shoes of the disciples and to hear Jesus ask us: “Who do you say I am?” Like Peter, we could probably give an academic answer based on what we can remember from the days when we had to learn by rote questions and answers from the catechism. However, given that most of us have been Christians for life and have spent all those years developing a relationship with Jesus, how would we now describe this Jesus whom we regard not only as the Son of God but also as a personal friend?

“Who do you say I am?” is not the kind of question that even our closest friends would dare ask us. Nor is it the kind of question we would be game enough to put to them, simply because we stand to be embarrassed or hurt by any respondent brave enough to tell us the truth of how she or he sees us. Perhaps there have been a few rare occasions in our lives when, after making a public presentation, we have taken the risk of saying to someone we really trust: “Well, how do you think I went?” If we don’t receive enthusiastic endorsement or if our respondent offers even a hint of criticism, we can become defensive or dispirited. People who stand for public office effectively ask the sort of question that Jesus did, except that there is an expectation that respondents will give their answers anonymously and within the boundaries of criteria that are generally accepted as appropriate for positions of public office. Of course, not everyone plays by these “rules”, and people running for public office are pilloried by journalists and others who want to put on the public record what they really think of their private lives. There’s a story about one of our former Prime Ministers, Gough Whitlam who, as part of his electioneering activities to attract the votes of senior citizens, visited a hostel for the elderly. Walking down a corridor, he greeted an elderly man who was slowly coming the other way with the help of a walking frame. After greeting him, Gough ventured a question: “And, sir, do you know who I am?” The man took another look at him and then said: “No, but if you ask the nurse, I’m sure she’ll tell you.”

For those of us who claim to be followers of Jesus, a sure way of answering his question is simply to examine how we conduct ourselves. What we do, best testifies to what we really say. If there is a gap between what we say and what we do, then there is something astray in our rhetoric. Actions really do speak louder than words! Another way of deepening his question is to explore the answer to another question: “Who am I?” Answering that question honestly will give each of us an insight into how we relate to Jesus and what we really think of him and his teaching.

If all of this seems too much like a head trip or an excursion into philosophy, we can always look at what others have said about Jesus as a start to formulating our own response. Jesus has been portrayed in almost every way imaginable by people who insist on having him as they want or need him to be. There have been artists who have portrayed him as a soft and saccharine person dispensing encouragement but without the slightest trace of challenge or passion. Polemicists have presented him as a revolutionary and a subversive, an ancient version of Che Guevara. Others still would have us see him as a purveyor of platitudes, as gentle, generous, compassionate

and forgiving. Even a rapid excursion through the Gospels will uncover a Jesus who is indeed kind and gentle and forgiving but who is also not afraid to challenge, to make demands and to stir us up; who expects that we give preference to the poor, who demands that we not scandalise children, who makes dire threats against those of us who neglect the destitute, who refuse to forgive our enemies or who rip-off the poor. This is a Jesus who can find no place for compromise and whose dream for us is that we live with integrity and with an eye to those who do it tough. He presents himself in this way and asks whether we are prepared to live and die for him and for the message he proclaimed.

If the Jesus who asks us: “Who do *you* say I am?” fails to excite us and stir us to want to be more concerned for others, then we hardly know him. And if we dare to seek an answer to the question: “Who am I?”, all we really need to do is to hold up to ourselves the mirror of the Gospel. It will be a revelation.