

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

“But you,” he said to them, “who do you say I am?” “You are the Messiah,” Simon Peter answered, “the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blest are you, Simon son of Jonah! ...I, for my part, declare to you that you are ‘Rock’, and on this rock I will build my church, and the jaws of death shall not prevail against it.”

Matthew 16, 13-20



As I write this reflection, hundreds of thousands of young people are making their way to Madrid to celebrate World Youth Day with Pope Benedict. I expect that their motivation in coming together emanates largely from their commitment to the Gospel and to the person of Jesus who puts to them and to us the very same question that he put to Peter in this Sunday's gospel: "Who do you say I am?"

The catechism we had in our school days and the creed we recite at Mass answer that question very much like the formulaic response that Matthew puts in Peter's mouth in today's gospel reading: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

While you're pondering what answer you will give to Jesus' question "Who do **you** say I am?", it might be worth reflecting on the propensity Christians over the centuries have had for shaping Jesus into the particular image that suited them at the time. It's surely no surprise to any of us that we all have a tendency to turn Jesus into who we want or need him to be. We all do it to a certain extent whenever we ask ourselves questions like: "How would Jesus respond to the difficult situation that I have to deal with right now?" That's just a constructive way of applying the values and ideals of the Gospel to the challenges and decision-making we try to negotiate as Christians. However, we're all familiar with the fact that some people have tried to paint Jesus as a political seditionary or as Superman or as little more than a well-intentioned social-worker. We know that artists have projected him with the physical features of their own ethnic group or have magnified one of his personality characteristics to make a point. We are also familiar with the way in which modern musicals like *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* have portrayed him respectively as a peace-loving hippie or a wonder-worker, with no interest in challenging anyone or anything. As recently as 2004, Mel Gibson gave us his projection of Jesus in his controversial film *The Passion of the Christ*. All that is just a sample of how others have gone about moulding Jesus into the image they wanted him to have.

So, our answer to Jesus' question: "Who do **you** say I am?" will almost certainly reflect what we have projected onto him or how we have shaped him into an image with which we are comfortable. (That's nothing unusual, because that's what we do with most of the people with whom we live and work - we form in our minds images based on how we have interacted with them over time.) So having thought about all that, what's your genuine

response to Jesus' question, and moreover, to what extent does your behavior match your words? That's the acid test! We will all answer Jesus' question in different ways but what we do will be testimony as to whether or not we have answered with integrity and in resonance with the Gospel Jesus proclaimed.

Now let's turn our attention to exploring something of why Jesus would have asked such a question in the first place. To get some insight into that, we must remind ourselves that, by becoming human, Jesus accepted all the limitations that come with living and growing within the confines of time and space. So Jesus had to learn and develop as we do. He wasn't just pretending to be going through the motions of being human, every now and then giving God a conspiratorial wink with one divine eye. No, he was fully human, and, as a consequence, would have been wondering how he was coming across to the crowds who gathered to listen to him. So his question to the disciples was something like: "How do you think I'm going? Am I making any kind of lasting impression?" He was wondering about the impression he was having on others, not to mention the impression he had of himself. Peter's response to him was something that only a close friend could give. His clear and direct words were an expression of encouragement as well as confirmation of his belief that Jesus was on the right track. And surely all of us are, at times, in need of that kind of affirmation. And all of us are called on from time to time to step up to the mark and give honest and open feedback to people around us who need to hear the truth. So it was not surprising that Jesus acknowledged Peter's honesty by calling him a rock of support.

In Matthew's Gospel, Peter's profession of faith and confidence in Jesus is something of a pivotal point, for it is from here onwards that Jesus focuses his energy on instructing the disciples on how to follow in his footsteps and assume responsibility for furthering his mission in the world.

The message of all of this for us is that, only when we have come to realize who Jesus is and to appreciate the significance of his Gospel and its role in guiding our living and acting, we grow into a deep understanding of who we are and what our role as Christians in our world is all about. If we care to think about it, we eventually come to realize that everything we say, every significant decision we make and all the commitments we make are really answers to Jesus' question: "Who do you say I am?"