

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus asks a couple very pointed and very important questions. Speaking to his disciples, he asks them, “Who do people say I am?” And then he follows up, “Who do you say I am?” Imagine Jesus appeared to you today, in the flesh, and asked you, “Who do you say that I am?” Talk about being put on the spot!

And yet this question boils down to the very essence of things. It is a question that brings us to the very heart of the Christian faith. However much or little you know about Christianity and about the Bible, it is essential that we know who Jesus is. The answer to this question determines if a person is going to spend eternity with God, or eternity separated from him. Who do you say Jesus is? It is vitally important that we know Jesus. We must know his person. We must know his work. And finally, we must know what it means to be his follower. All of this answered in today’s Gospel lesson: **Mark 8:27-35:**

*27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”
28 They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”
29 “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”
Peter answered, “You are the Christ.”
30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.
31 He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.
32 He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.
33 But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”
34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.*

It is clear from the gospels that Jesus was always very concerned that people know who he really was. Last week you heard how Jesus commanded the deaf and dumb man not to tell anyone about how he was healed. The reason? Jesus didn’t want anyone to misunderstand who he was. Earlier in the chapter from which we just read, some Pharisees asked Jesus to do a miracle. But Jesus refused because he didn’t want them to misunderstand who he was, or why he came.

For the same reason, in our reading we hear Jesus ask his disciples the question, “Who do people say I am?” Jesus is concerned that people know who he is.

The disciples answered the question: “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” It appears that most people, although they may have met Jesus and even heard him teach, they really didn’t know who Jesus was.

Some thought he was John the Baptist. Actually, John had already been beheaded by Herod. But some people thought John rose from the dead, and Jesus was he. Similarly, some thought Jesus was the resurrected prophet Elijah. Why would they think this? They probably knew of the prophet Malachi’s prophecy (4:5): “See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.” Malachi spoke these years 400 years after Elijah had been taken up to heaven, and 400 years before Jesus came on the scene. Some thought Jesus was the fulfillment of this prophecy. Actually, though, it was John the Baptist who fulfilled the prophecy. He was the last prophet who prepared the way for Jesus. Still others thought Jesus was simply one of many prophets God occasionally sent to his people.

It is obvious that none of these people were correct. They all had a wrong understanding of who Jesus was. They all thought he was a man sent by God, but nothing more than a man.

Throughout history most people have misunderstood who Jesus was. Even today, most scholarly people will insist that Jesus was nothing more than a gifted teacher. Some will even grant that he was a skilled magician, or perhaps even a miracle worker. But one thing all unbelievers agree upon is that Jesus was **not** God, nor was he the Son of God. Nor was he the fulfillment of prophecy. Rather, he was a very good man who accomplished great things.

But who is Jesus really? Jesus posed this question next to his own disciples. He said, "That's what others say about me. But what about **you**. *Who do you say that I am?*" Peter was usually the most outspoken of the disciples, and he also is here. He immediately answers, "*You are the Christ.*" In Matthew's Gospel, we read Peter's full answer. "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*" [16:16].

To really understand Peter's answer, we need to know the meaning of the word, "Christ." Many of you already know, but a quick review never hurts. The word "Christ" is a Greek translation of a word I'm sure you are also familiar with... the word "Messiah." Both mean, "The Anointed One." In Old Testament times, prophets, priests and kings of Israel were anointed. The act of anointing included putting oil on the person's head. However, the act of anointing carried with it the meaning that the person was chosen by God for his purposes. That person was consecrated (set apart) for service to God. In addition, when a person was anointed, he was endowed with God's power to accomplish God's will. So in a broad sense, many people in Old Testament times could be called "anointed one." However, by the end of Old Testament times, Messiah or Christ was used to specifically refer to the one particular Promised One who was chosen, consecrated, and empowered to save Israel. It referred to the promised Savior.

Who is Jesus? As Peter said, he is the Christ! Truly the word Christ well describes Jesus! He is the ultimate Anointed One who takes the place of every prophet, priest and king. As a prophet Jesus didn't merely proclaim God's Word, but (as the Evangelist John says) Jesus **was** the Word of God. As a priest, Jesus didn't merely perform sacrifices for the people, he sacrificed **himself** for all people and forever intercedes between us and God. As king, Jesus didn't conquer earthly foes or establish a temporal kingdom. Jesus conquered Satan, sin and death for all eternity! He established a kingdom without end! Truly Peter couldn't have been more accurate when he said Jesus was the Christ. In the full sense of the word, Jesus is indeed the Christ. That is who Jesus is. God wants us to know this.

The next verse says, "*Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.*" Why such a warning? Again, Jesus was very concerned that people would not misunderstand who he was. Although the disciples properly understood the term, "Christ," most others did not. Most people were looking forward to an earthly Messiah -- one who would free them from Roman oppression. They were expecting a political leader and national hero to restore the country of Israel. These people were watching for the wrong kind of Christ, and Jesus didn't want them to think that this was the kind of Christ he was.

To know who Jesus is, one needs to know more than the facts that he is the Messiah, the Son of God. One also must know Christ's work and his mission. Since the disciples did understand who Jesus was, Jesus proceeds to tell them what his mission was as Christ. "*He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again*" [31]. Jesus spoke of these things previously, but always in a veiled, hidden way. He used the term, "destroy this temple [John 2:19]" to refer to his death. And the "Son of Man must be lifted up [John 12:34]" to refer to his resurrection and glorification after his death. But this is the first of time (and many more would follow) when Jesus speaks of his suffering, death and resurrection in plain, direct language that could not be misunderstood.

And we see Peter most certainly did understand... immediately and completely. He didn't like

what Jesus said. *“Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.”* Peter didn’t want Jesus to talk about death.. Jesus would conquer! He would lead the people of Israel out from bondage! He wouldn’t be captured, suffer or die! A dead Messiah served no purpose in Peter’s way of thinking. Peter strongly reprimanded Jesus for talking this way. Peter obviously had no idea of God’s plan of redemption. He didn’t understand how the death of Jesus would mean life for all who believed! He didn’t understand how Jesus was a sacrifice to pay for the sins of the world. And he didn’t understand that Jesus would live again three days after his death.

Jesus reacted strongly to Peter’s rebuke. *“But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men” [33].* Why did Jesus go so far as to address Peter as Satan? The reason was that Peter was tempting Jesus in the exact same way that Satan had tempted Jesus. Remember when Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness? Satan said that if Jesus would just worship him, he would give him all the kingdoms of the world to rule over. Satan tempted Jesus to be a great earthly ruler and set aside his mission as Savior.

Didn’t Peter suggest the very same thing? He rebuked Jesus for speaking of his suffering and death. Yet that’s what Jesus had to do to pay the penalty for all sin. Suffering and death was Jesus’ mission! Peter tempted Jesus to not die for the sins of the world. Jesus didn’t give in to the temptation. Instead he exposed it, saying, *“You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”*

Most people today, just as they misunderstand the person of Jesus, they also misunderstand the work and mission of Jesus. Some preach that Jesus came to give us an easy life and blessing in this world. Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas has 43,000 people attend worship each weekend because they preach that Jesus’ gives us an easy life and earthly blessings. That’s not the Jesus I follow.

Some say the value of Jesus’ life and death was this: it encouraged morality and an upright life. He is an example of courage and conviction. They say that Jesus shows us how to stand up for whatever we believe in. That’s not what Jesus came to do. That’s not the Jesus I follow.

Others go to such extremes as to say that Jesus was just another religious fanatic who started the world’s largest cult. That’s not what he came to do. That’s not the Jesus I follow.

We know from the Bible Jesus’ real mission. He came to earth not to give us an easy life now, but a joy filled life in eternity. He came to earth not primarily to give us an example of how to live morally upright lives, but to live a moral and perfect life **in place of** us. He didn’t come to show us how to be dedicated to just causes, even being willing to die for such causes, he came to die **in our place** so we wouldn’t have to. He didn’t come to demonstrate a way of life which, if we follow close enough and try hard enough, leads to heaven, rather he came to die a horrible death so he could **give** us heaven. He came to earth to do what we couldn’t do: live a perfect life. He came to earth to pay for a debt we could never repay: the guilt of our sin. Jesus’ mission was to pay for the sin of all mankind in order to reconcile man to God. And Jesus accomplished his mission.

Friends, **know Jesus**. He is the promised Christ, God’s only Son, set apart and empowered by God to accomplish our salvation. **Know Jesus**, who credited us with his holiness and takes the blame for our wrongs.

What is left? Follow Jesus. And know what it means to be his follower. Our reading continues: *Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”*

The modern prosperity gospel proclaimed in so many churches is a flat out lie. When you trust Jesus with all your heart, do you get freedom from debt? Freedom from disease? Freedom from conflict and strife? Is faith in Jesus the ticket to life on easy street here on earth? NO! Such teaching does not come from Jesus, but the devil. The Bible teaches that followers of Jesus will suffer. They will bear a cross.

In fact, Jesus outlines three things that are characteristic of his followers.

First, he says, "*Deny yourself.*" The world encourages us to be self sufficient, self-reliant and independent. Jesus says that to be his follower, you need to do the opposite. Deny yourself. That means you are willing to put your own will aside and willingly submit to the will of God.

Second he says, "*Take up your cross.*" Note that Jesus doesn't say you must be prepared to take up your cross, should one come along. No! He calls each and every follower of his to take up his cross... because he will have one. Because you are a Christian and *only* because you are a Christian, you will have a harder life here on earth. Jesus was humble and he served and he was put to death on a cross. When you follow him in his footsteps, it's a path of humility and service... and suffering.

And third, "*Follow me,*" Jesus says. Not ...follow your heart's desires ...follow affluence ...follow the world's lead. But follow JESUS. If you have earthly gain in mind, or earthly objectives, then you are not a follower of Jesus. Jesus calls us to leave all behind and follow him.

Now understand this correctly: bearing your cross and suffering for Jesus do not make you a Christian. The crosses you bear do not cause you to be saved. It's the other way around. When you are a true follower of Jesus, and when you trust his cross redeems your sin, then what necessarily and always follows is that you will bear a cross.

Well, now you know. Jesus asks each of us, "And what about you? Who do you say I am?" This is one identity we do not want to mistake. He is the Anointed One, God's Son who came to earth to live a perfect life in our place. He died on the cross for all our sins. He rose from the dead to prove this is true. This is the true Jesus whom we know, believe, love and worship. As Jesus' followers, we have eternal security. We are members of the Kingdom of God. We have the glorious riches of eternal life in heaven to look forward to. But while here on earth, know this: following Jesus means denying self and bearing a cross as we follow him. It means giving up life as the world knows it and taking up life as Jesus has revealed it. Know Jesus: His person, his work, and what it means to be his follower. Let us pray:

Lord, help us let go of our lives, deny ourselves and follow you. There will always be crosses in our lives which we must bear. Give us courage and faith take them up willingly and cheerfully in Jesus' name. Keep before us the image of Jesus' cross where he removed our sin and guilt forever, and keep our eyes focused on the blessings and glory of eternity. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.