

Father O'Connor's Homily for 15 September 2024
Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time-B

Isaiah 50: 5-9a

James 2: 14-18

Mark 8: 27-35

Jesus asks a very important question in today's Gospel: "Who do you say that I am?"

And Simon Peter answers: "You are the Christ" – meaning "the Anointed One," "the Messiah" [Matthew 16:16, Mark 8:30, Luke 9:20].

How do you answer that question? It is a critical question, demanding a personal response from every single one of us as followers of Jesus. "Who do you say that I am?"

Over the ages people have provided lots of answers to this question. And very often they want to shape Jesus according to their own preferences. There was an age when people thought of Jesus as a kind of Zeus-like deity, ready to cast lightning bolts at the world. Another age has seen Jesus as a handsome, well-groomed young man on a solid-gold cross from Tiffany's Jewelry Store in New York City.

Someone said that in our own times we tend to look at Jesus as "Jesus L-I-T-E": Jesus my buddy, who is ready to pat me on the back, give me a high-five, and wink at my "misbehaviors." A Jesus who is sweet and non-judgmental... a live-and-let-live kind of guy. But certainly not someone we would die for, and not necessarily someone we would live for either.

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks us.

There was a survey that was taken of young Americans about their faith-lives. Some good news from that survey was that most of the respondents were not hostile towards religion. Why not? Because, as some said, "Religion is no big deal." Others even said, "Jesus is no big deal."

One of the respondents went on to say, "Well, it doesn't really matter anyway. Because everyone is going to go to heaven when they die. Jesus will automatically forgive me for everything that I've done wrong in life. So what's the worry?" What kind of a Jesus is that? Certainly not the Jesus of the Gospels.

As Richard Niebuhr [1892-1971] put it: "What some people want to believe in is a God without wrath who brings people without sin into a kingdom of heaven without judgment through a Christ without a cross."

Our young people are full of passion, and sometimes we older people present a passion-free Jesus to them. Our youth want to make a difference in our world. They are talented, they are generous, and they want to do something meaningful with their lives.

That is one of the reasons that millions of young people turn out for World Youth Day, wherever in the world it is held, in order to be with an elderly Pope in a wheelchair. And why do they want to be with the Pope? Because he stands for something, and for Someone. Our young people look for the heroic, but sometimes we older people present a Jesus to them that is more like a toothy Paul Lynde with a halo than someone to live and die for.

“Who do you say that I am?” Who is the Jesus we read about in the Gospels? He is a Jesus who will get upset with us and tell us to pluck out our eye if our eyes are lusting over pornography on the internet. He is a Jesus who is not happy about the violence in our world that we so willingly bring into our lives and our homes through television, movies, and video games. Jesus tells us that if somebody slaps us on one cheek, we should turn and offer that person the other cheek. And that we are to forgive – and to forgive from our hearts.

And that if we don’t, there are consequences. As the Act of Contrition warns us, we can risk losing the joys of heaven and suffering instead the pains of hell.

Is the picture that I’m painting right now of Jesus inaccurate? Not if you read the Gospels. In Matthew, chapter 25, Jesus tells the story of the judgment of the sheep and the goats. The sheep say to Him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink...?” And Jesus answers, “Whatever you did for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did for me.” And they went off to eternal glory in heaven.

But the goats object, “When did we see you hungry and not feed you, or thirsty and not give you drink...?” And Jesus answers, “As often as you did NOT do this for the least of my brothers and sisters, you failed to do it for me.” And they went off to eternal punishment in hell.

“Who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered so well: “You are the Christ.” Take that question to heart, my fellow Christians. So much rests upon our answers. In fact, everything rests upon our answers. “And you – who do you say that I am?”