

**Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
(June 20, 2010)**

Who Do You Say That I Am?

Listen to the reaction of one person after hearing this Gospel:

“Who do you say that I am?” What a hard question Jesus addresses to his disciples. I can imagine their looking surprised and nervous, wondering what it’s all about as Jesus speaks to them. And that hard question is for us, too. “Who is Jesus?”

When I was a boy, Jesus was sometimes the all-powerful Son of God who could do anything. At other times, he was a kindly miracle-worker who used his power to help sick and troubled people. As I got older he became a political activist who wanted to overthrow the corrupt social order. At another time in my life he was a prophet who challenged people about the way they lived their lives.

Like the crowds in Luke’s story, I saw Jesus with eyes that made him out to be what I wanted him to be. But I think I missed the point of the question. Jesus was not asking a tricky identity question where we are like anxious school children trying to come up with the right answer. When he asks, “Who do you say that I am?” he is issuing a challenge. Who am I to you? What difference do I make in your life? What does it mean for you to be my disciple?

And there is no once-and-for-all answer. Our response is to live with the question: Who am I to you? And Jesus continues to invite us: Follow me and find out.

St. Ignatius heard that invitation to follow Jesus and find out who he was. Many thousands of others have done the same. Ignatius heard God and Jesus say to him, “I love you very, very much and I want you to love me back.” And he did. He quite literally fell in love with Jesus and it changed his life. Ignatius’ biggest gift to the rest of us is his Spiritual Exercises, a retreat that helps us to know what God and Jesus are for each of us. In the Exercises he asks us to spend a great deal of time contemplating the life of Christ and asking God for this grace: to know Jesus more intimately, to love him more intensely, and to follow him more closely. It’s an invitation

that's meant not just for Jesuits or priests and religious but for everybody. Indeed it's a very good way for each of us to find the answer to the question "Who do you say that I am?" Who is Jesus for me? What difference does he make in my life?

I have spent a lot of time thinking and praying over that question in my almost sixty-one years as a Jesuit and like the person I quoted at the beginning Jesus has meant different things to me at different times. What impresses me most right now and where I am at this stage in my life is perhaps what is most obvious about him but what has come to mean more and more to me in these recent years – and that is his love. Just think of the many ways he showed that love: he healed the sick, he cleansed lepers. Indeed he did not hesitate to touch people that others would not go near, and he let them touch him. He looked at the crowds following him and the Gospels say his heart went out to them – his heart, that universal symbol of love. He said, "Let the children come to me," when the disciples were trying to keep them away, and he embraced them and blessed them. When John in the Gospel begins his narrative of the Last Supper, he says, "Jesus, having loved his own, loved them to the end." After that last supper, John tells us, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples to show them how he loved them and how they were to show love for one another. He knelt before Peter who would deny him, and before Judas who would betray him, and I can just imagine him looking into their eyes as he dried their feet and saying to them, "It's all right. I love you anyway." In the garden he allows Judas to betray him with a kiss, and again I can imagine him perhaps reaching out to Judas, holding on to him, and with all the affection he could manage to show, again saying with all his heart, "It's all right. I love you anyway."

And then of course, the supreme act of love, he died for us. No one has greater love than this: to give his life for his friends. Who do I say that Jesus is? As banal as it may sound, for me Jesus is the great lover. Now it's easy enough for me to say that. But there is a hook. The hook is this: when we have come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the love of Jesus for us and when we have seen how attractive, warm, and winning a person he is, there is only one reasonable response to make and that is to love him back, and when you love someone you want to do what pleases

that person. What is it that pleases Jesus? “Love one another as I have loved you – as I have loved you.” Jesus loved us quite literally to death. So if we are to love one another as he loved us, it sounds as though he is saying we have to be willing to die for one another. Now, I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I’m not sure I’m there yet after all these years of prayer and contemplation. Oh, there are definitely some people in my life that I feel I would be willing to die for – but for everybody? That’s asking a lot. It sounds like one of those impossible things he asks for in the Sermon on the Mount: Love your enemies, turn the other cheek, never return violence for violence.

Who do I say that Jesus is? What difference does he make in my life? He is the lover par excellence. He is the one who makes all those impossible things possible. He is that mysterious presence that is always urging me on, whispering, “Come on, you can do it. Just try a little harder. I’m here to help you. Just try.” That’s who Jesus is for me. What about you?