

## TOUGH QUESTIONS

Mark 8:27-38

“Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” 28And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” 29He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” 30And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. 31Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?” 38

“If I am not for myself, who will be? But, if I am only for myself, what am I?”

Ethics of the Fathers Hillel

“Who do people say that I am?”  
“Who do you say that I am?”

Today’s gospel from Mark is a dramatic turning point in Jesus’ journey with his disciples. It contains the most exciting and yet most inscrutable questions about the identity of Jesus and the meaning of discipleship. This is a moment pregnant with ultimate concerns and possible answers to questions about who Jesus really is and what we, who would follow him, are called to be. Here is a crossroads, a gate, an intersection, and a display of spectacular mystery that precedes the beginning of the end.

In some forms of ancient literature the center of a poem or story was called the chiasm. This word comes from the Greek letter x or chi, which is a cross or a crossing place. The chiasm often holds the clue that explicates the rest of the text, looking back to the beginning and ahead to the end of the story. The account from today's gospel is a chiastic turning point and a theological crossroad exactly half way through Mark's gospel.

In his book, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, Ched Myers writes, "They (Jesus and his followers) arrive in the district of Caesarea-Philippi, a major Hellenistic city which---controlled an extensive territory and even had the privilege of coining money. It was so named to distinguish it from Caesarea, the seat of Roman government on the coast ..."

The events from today's gospel take place under the shadow of the Roman Empire. Caesarea Philippi is a citadel of political power. This backdrop gives the conversation between Jesus and his disciples a strong and ominous political overtone. The Messiah whom Peter identifies would be no friend of Rome.

Even today, this region is still the locus of political and military struggle between Hamas and Israel. The cross on which Jesus will die is Roman. When Jesus spells out that the requirement of discipleship is taking up one's cross, he is suggesting that being a follower of his has dangerous political implications.

Over time, "taking up one's cross" has become a spiritual metaphor for personal suffering, whatever that might be...the death of a loved one, an addiction, a handicap. That is a valid interpretation of the text, but the cross for Jesus is much more than a metaphor. To see Jesus in only spiritual terms is to neuter much of the power of his prophetic message to the political and religious powers of his day. It is also to minimize the risks that Jesus' followers will have to take. They could die following him.

Part of the significance of Caesarea Philippi is that this town was entirely Gentile. Why ask the two big questions here? One possible answer is to imagine that Jesus and his disciples are on retreat, in a place that is safe for hard questions and disarming self-disclosure. Indeed, they have come to the northern-most point in their travels and are far from the demands of Galilee and the hostile powers of Jerusalem. Caesarea Philippi was and still is a holy place. In contrast to the exclusively Jewish character of Jerusalem, this town was wide open spiritually and religiously. There was a shrine to Pan, the Greek god of woods and trees. There was also an Aesclepian hospital for

healing. It was a place that was tolerant, international and religiously inclusive. What better arena to ask timeless questions about the identity of one whose spirit would cross all kinds of borders?

Where do we feel safe to ask probing spiritual questions, I mean really ask them? Where do we find an

atmosphere where we are confident about exploring the nature of God in relation to our own journeys? We may have much to learn from AA and Al Anon and other self-help groups who struggle openly with matters of identity, healing and purpose. I hope we feel safe here.

So Jesus asks these two probing questions:

“Who do people say that I am?”

“But, who do you say that I am?”

These questions are prefigured earlier in Mark’s gospel after Jesus stills the stormy waves and wind, and the amazed disciples ask themselves, “Who then is this that even the wind and waves obey him?”

Who then is this?

How well do the disciples do on a “Jesus exam”? Not really well. But probably no worse than we might do. Jesus and his followers lived in very close quarters. When you live this way with someone; friend, spouse, partner or associate, you may think you know and understand him or her quite well. Perhaps you

see part of what’s there, or perhaps you project and see what you want to see.

The more you know this person, the more you may realize that your first assessment was probably superficial. There is mystery, change and development.

All of these last three characteristics were true as well for both Jesus and his disciples. What might at first appear very clear to us, who have the benefit (or liability) of hundreds of years of Christian teaching and tradition, seems to dumbfound the disciples. We know who Jesus is. Right? Why don’t Peter and the disciples know?

Jesus rebukes Peter for “setting his mind not on divine things but on human things.” We can relate to Peter. Jesus’ reprimand echoes his lambasting of the Pharisees and Scribes in the lesson two weeks ago when he says to them, “You hold onto human tradition but ignore the commandments of God.”

As Robert Frost put it, “We dance around the circle and suppose. But the secret sits in the middle and knows.”

Jesus’ two hard-bore questions to

his disciples and to us leap over the councils, creeds and theological “takes” of the last two millennia. Who do you think God is? This leads to a corollary question: “Who do I think I am?” Isn’t the way we understand God going to effect our self-understanding? The ways in which we define ourselves; education level, income, social status, position, ethnicity, who we know or who we don’t know, clothing, emblems of worldly accomplishment ... all these and other ways we self-define would probably not be of much interest to Jesus.

God and we are mysteries in the process of becoming. It is a little frightening to admit the thinness of our knowledge. But there it is. How to trust what we cannot precisely ascertain? The apostle, Paul, reassures us with his admission that “Now we see through a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully,”

We don’t have to get it all. Has the way you understand Jesus changed in the last five years? The last five weeks?

What if we were to leave the straight and protective lines of our pews ... and were to sit down in a circle with the Rabbi, our Teacher, with Jesus? And what if we allowed ourselves to show how little we really know about him, but how much we thirst for connection with him? Revealing our vulnerability might strengthen our faith.

In speaking authentically of Jesus, there can be no “company line”. Maybe Jesus was not really interested in starting up a company anyway.

When asked the question (“But who do you say that I am?”) Jesus puts to his disciples, Mother Teresa replied,

“He is the truth to be told, the way to be walked, the life to be loved.”