

This passage from Matthew's gospel is rather familiar to us Catholics. In the dome of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, it is quoted in gigantic letters (in Latin of course) "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church." Catholics believe this refers to Popes as successors of Peter. Protestants have said that it applied to Peter only.

I don't want to enter this controversy. I wish rather to focus on how this gospel is a turning point, a crossroads in the gospel of Matthew. Knowing the context of a gospel passage helps us to understand its deeper meaning. This passage divides the gospel and turns it in a new direction.

The chapters before this passage described Jesus's teachings, especially those on the kingdom of God. It also demonstrated many of his healings. The apostles and others were in wonder at this Rabbi and who he was and what he taught. You might say that in these previous chapters he has established his credentials as someone to listen to and heed. And now he puts them on the spot. "Who do you say that I am?" Imagine if someone asked you that. How would you answer? It is rather embarrassing that someone would think you know him or her that well and then tell the truth. But this request is important for what will follow.

Jesus has gathered admirers who want favors and inspiration. But in today's gospel he is now asking admirers to be followers. And he will indicate that to follow Jesus will not always be easy. His path is toward Jerusalem and suffering and death. Can you stick with me through all of this?

In the gospels of the Sundays ahead we will hear tension and controversy. Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, ordinary admirers will find fault with him and be threatened in their own secure, familiar, comfortable religious traditions. The willingness to follow him starts with knowing who he is. "Who do you say that I am?" He is not just an inspiring Rabbi. He is not just a miracle worker. There is a depth to him that no one has previously encountered. Peter and others have come to realize that he is the Christ, the son of the living God. Accepting the difficult path following him with its obstacles and sufferings, however, will still need to be learned.

Thus there are two ways to react to Jesus – admire him or follow him. I think these two ways still prevail among us. The first way is the ordinary way to learn, normal for children and young adults. The second way is achieved only by some.

The first way we might call transactional religion. I think I grew up with this approach to God. I give God something so God will give something to me. I pray, I do good deeds, I obey the commandments, I go to church. I try to be a good boy to please God. And we all hope that God will bless us in many ways.

The second way, usually opening up to us in the second half of life, might be called transformational religion. My image of God changes and continues to change. I find that the God of Jesus bestows love on everyone universally and gratuitously. I cannot earn it or do anything to get God to give it to me. We give up trying to change God and let God change us. We follow Jesus in the way of love, giving, loving, forgiving even when it hurts. We get over our ego-centered existence to become God centered. We stop thinking and acting dualistically, that is always separating us and them, body and spirit, matter and divinity. We are on the way to become one, one with God, one with every human being, one with creation, one with ourselves. It is hard work and demands sacrifice. It calls on us to be honest, vulnerable, able to really know and accept ourselves. But we soon learn that God is not someone above us but within us and always with us to do what we cannot do ourselves.

The second way, the way of transformation, is nurtured by prayer, the sacraments, solitude and silence, as well as giving our time and life to the needs of others. I am not the center of the universe. I surrender any need to be such a center.

The sad truth is we can avoid the way of transformation and stay with the secure, black and white way of transactional religion. The interior life with God takes too much work. I suspect this is the more common form of Religion for many people.

I can start with answering the question, “Who do you say that I am?” Saint Paul, in today’s second reading may help us to know this loving “Christ, the son of the living God.” Paul proclaims these words – “Oh, the depths of the riches and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given the Lord anything that one may be repaid? For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen”

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