

“You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it....” As Catholics we know that, with these words, Jesus established Peter as the leader of His Church. Jesus gave to Peter and to his successors what would become known as the office of the papacy. And that office has continued unbroken for nearly 2,000 years, as now we have the 265th successor to St. Peter, Pope Francis.

But before Jesus bestows this new identity and office upon Simon, son of Jonah, before Jesus gives him the name Peter, there is another identity which is at question - “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

This question that Jesus asks His apostles was an important one - who were the people saying that Jesus was? What was the popular consensus? The answers came back - John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets. The people of the time were recognizing in Jesus the same thing they had seen in all the other prophets - a man who taught with authority, a man who worked mighty deeds and miracles, a man who was trying to point others to God. But this first question was not so important for the answers that it brought as it was for the invitation it provided to the apostles. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” was a lead in, an introduction; it invited the Apostles to begin to reflect on a much more important question.

And then it comes: “But who do YOU say that I am?” These were the men who had been with Jesus for a couple of years. They were the ones who had learned from Him, ate with Him, laughed with Him. They were His closest followers. And so Jesus asks them: “Who do YOU say that I am?” It is Simon Peter who responds. The one who had been so bold as to step out of the boat to walk to Jesus on the water makes an even bigger leap of faith: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Simon Peter was given a unique gift by God the Father. He was given the insight, the wisdom, the understanding to make this public profession of faith. Simon Peter recognized that Jesus is the Christ - which means the Messiah, the Anointed One. He recognized that Jesus is the Son of the living God. Simon Peter saw in Jesus something that could only be known by revelation from God Himself - that Jesus is the Messiah and the Divine Son of God.

But it is not only the apostles who hear Jesus ask this question: “Who do you say that I am?” This is a question that Jesus asks of all of us. And all of us must give a response.

As a priest and even before I was a priest I have had the opportunity many times to work with young people who are preparing for the sacrament of confirmation. A question that I like to ask the candidates is this: Who is Jesus to you? There have been times that I have been struck

by answers just as profound as St. Peter's. But what I have found most often is that our understanding of Jesus can be centered around something a bit lower, something more ordinary. Often our ways of describing Jesus can be as a friend or as a brother or as someone I can talk to about anything. Now, don't get me wrong, seeing Jesus in this way is an incredible blessing. How amazing it is that Jesus calls us friends or brothers and sisters. How amazing when we feel the freedom to talk to Him about anything.

But it is also important that, as we experience Jesus in these familiar ways, we not lose sight of who Jesus is in Himself. I am often struck by how the people in the Bible react to Jesus when they experience Him in all His glory. Think back a few weeks to the Transfiguration. Peter, James, and John were the three apostles who knew Jesus best; yet, when they saw Jesus transfigured in glory before them, they fell on their faces in fear and in awe! Think of St. Paul. When He encountered the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, he fell to the ground and was struck blind for three days. Think of St. John and his vision of Jesus in the Book of Revelation. John is the beloved disciple of Jesus; yet when he saw the Lord in glory, he fell down at His feet as though dead. These people in Holy Scriptures recognize this reality - that while Jesus is one like us, He is also God - the Lord and King of heaven and earth!

This was the great realization of Peter in the Gospel today. Jesus is much greater than just a friend or a brother. He is those things, to be sure, but he is also so much greater! As we profess in the Creed, He is the “Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages.... through him all things were made.” He is higher than the heavens, yet He stooped down to raise us up to Himself. The Christ, the Son of the living God has become like us in all things but sin so that He could raise us up to the very heights of heaven. No wonder those holy people of the Bible were struck with fear and awe in the presence of the Lord Jesus.

And so Jesus directs this question to us: “Who do you say that I am?” Perhaps in our prayer this week, we can allow the Lord to ask us this question and allow ourselves the time to answer. “Who do you say that I am?” The answer to this question is everything for us in the Christian life.

Here, in this holy sacrifice of the Mass, we will have the opportunity to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus. The one who asks us, “Who do you say that I am?,” will soon come to dwell in our hearts. As we receive Jesus in Holy Communion, may we have the faith to proclaim with Peter, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!”