

Can you respond like Peter, with the same enthusiasm, about Jesus' question? If not, you must ask why you're here this morning!

Today's Gospel reading reveals to us Jesus' method of teaching. Many people think that Jesus is a great teacher who often provides answers to life's difficult questions. In fact Jesus' teaching method is not by answering questions but asking them. Before we come to this method with greater clarity let me give an explanatory introduction.

If Jesus really was God, or the Son of God, why did He not tell us so plainly, and settle the question once for all? In other words, the Gospel story never explicitly tells us He was indeed God, or even the Son of God. If Jesus never claims to be the Son of God, why do we Christians tell people that 'He is truly the Son of God' as the centurion said at the foot of the cross? What proof is there? Well, that is why we must study the Gospel because in there we have Jesus' words, his deeds and his character. These become the accumulative evidence of who He is.

When people asked Jesus questions, He nearly always refused to answer, but asked them another question in return. It was as though He was saying, 'Use your wits and think hard, you will find that you know the answer to your own question'. When a lawyer asked Him, 'Who is my neighbour?' He did not answer the question directly, but told the parable of the Good Samaritan. And when he told it, the lawyer found that he could answer his own question.

The most important question in the Gospel story is the question posted by Jesus: 'Who do you say that I am?' (Matthew 16.15)

Now all of us here can recite the Creed by heart and so you can immediately reply, 'and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord?' Is that your answer to Jesus' central question? What do you really understand? Who do you say that He is?

The situation in which the question is asked is most significant. There had been much discussion as to whether Jesus was the Messiah

or not. But He had done none of the things that the Messiah was expected to do. He had shown no signs of raising an insurrection against the Romans; He had alienated both the religious and political leaders among the Jews; when the people wished to make Him King, He refused the offer; now He is in fact running away, since the Greek-speaking area of Caesarea Philippi was not part of the Holy Land of Palestine.

Let us go back to the Gospels, to ask how He shows Himself to people, and what claims He really makes for Himself.

First, we observed that He speaks with immense authority. This was the first thing that the crowds noticed – *'he taught them as one who had authority, and not as scribes'* (Mark 1.22). He claimed the right to interpret the law of Moses and to give it a far deeper meaning: *'You have heard that it was said to the men of old... But I say to you.'* This was a tremendous claim to make. The religion of the Jews consisted in the keeping of the law, and the law was regarded as the perfect revelation of the will of God. In the opinion of the Jews, Moses, who had received this law and made it known to them, was the greatest of all of sons of men. But Jesus claims the right to say 'I say to you'. It must have seemed great boldness on the part of Jesus to make this claim.

Furthermore, Jesus claimed unlimited authority over people. He called all sorts of people, from their homes and from their trade, and expected them to follow Him. Human leaders have sometimes made absolute loyalty claims on their followers, and have been gladly followed. But Jesus makes it clear that He is making these demands only because He knows Himself to stand in a relationship to God different from that of any other man: *'All things have been delivered to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him'* (Matthew 11.27).

Did Jesus claim to be the Messiah, the anointed One? The Jews were indeed expecting His appearance! To this question the answer can be 'Yes', and 'No'. It all depends on peoples' idea of what the

Messiah would be like, and as to what He would do. Most Jews wanted a king who would fight and deliver them from the Romans (John 18.36); at one time they reached such a conclusion that they came and wished to make Jesus King (John 6.15). And even the disciples did not fare better. Even up to Jesus' death, they were still thinking far too much in terms of an earthly kingdom (Mark 10.35-40). Jesus had indeed come to fulfil the purpose of God as His anointed One, but He had come to fulfil it in a way completely different from any that anyone at that time imagined. In order to be the true Messiah according to the purpose of God, He had to reject or modify all the ideas of the Jews about the Messiah. To have become Messiah on their terms would have been to betray the vocation which God had given Him. That is why He never directly presented Himself to them as their Messiah.

And yet, when to His question, 'Who do you say I am?' Peter answered, 'You are the Christ.', He is delighted, and seems gladly to accept the title. It is because at last Peter is willing to accept Him as Messiah on His own terms. Jesus has done none of the things that they expected Him to do. He has not raised an army. He has refused to become a king. He has made enemies of most of the leaders of the Jews. And yet, says Peter, 'You are the Christ'. Don't you know that Peter is really the first believer, and in this sense it is true that he is the rock on which the Church is built.

There is still a great deal that Peter and the other disciples have to learn, when Jesus begins to teach them a new truth – that the Messiah must suffer – they cannot accept it, and Peter in particular violently rejects the idea as intolerable. But they have begun to learn that they cannot fit Jesus into their ideas, but that they must change their ideas to fit in with His.

Jesus comes proclaiming the Kingdom of God. He does not say, in so many words, 'I am the King'. But he does make it plain that, because He is present, the Kingdom of God is present: *'If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you.'* (Luke 11.20). In other words, Jesus is saying, 'You are

looking this way and that to find the Kingdom; and if only you had eyes to see, the Kingdom is here in front of you. Since I am here, the Kingdom is here.' He speaks to His disciples of the Kingdom that God has given Him, and in which they are to share '*As my Father appointed a kingdom for me, so do I appoint for you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*' (Lk. 22.29-30).

What do you make of the inscription written on the Cross: 'This is the King of the Jews.' Do you think Pilate knew better than you who Jesus was?

Many folks have weird idea of being a Christian and Christian Church. Whenever and wherever there is a public confession 'You are the Messiah, the Son of living God' there is a Christian church. This is the simple acid test.