

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2021 B

At the very heart of Mark's Gospel is this question from Jesus: Who do you say that I am? It is the core of Mark's message, both figuratively – because the whole Gospel is structured around the gradual revelation of the identity of Jesus – and literally, as the exact center of the wordcount in the Greek text. It remains the essential Christian question. Sometimes our response is a life-changing moment; but it can always be a barometer of our relationship with Christ.

“Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asks this, Mark says, on the way to Caesarea Philippi. The place is not a coincidence. This Roman colony was associated both with the worldly power of the Emperors and the worship of Roman gods – and especially the unpredictable nature god called Pan, the direct source of our common word panic, which gives you a sense of where worship of Pan would logically lead.

So Jesus chooses this place to shape His followers' expectations. Is Jesus just one more spiritual figure with the power to work wonders in nature, like healing lepers or calming storms or multiplying barley loaves? Or is He the leader Who would overthrow the occupying Romans and become Emperor Himself? Is He simply another in the line of the prophets Who taught lessons in morality and foretold a coming Messiah for Israel, like John the Baptist and Elijah had done? Or ... is Jesus something else, something new, something MORE?

“Who do you say that I am?” It's a bit of an open-book test, because the answer is in the question ... I AM. This is the name God revealed to Moses from the Burning Bush in the Book of Exodus – in Hebrew, YAHWEH. It is a constant refrain in John's Gospel as Jesus names Himself: I am the Good Shepherd, I am the Bread of Life, I am the Light of the World, I am the Gate, I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. It is the testimony of Jesus to the woman at the well and to Caiaphas at His trial when he asked, “Are You the Messiah?” It is a declaration of His divinity, hidden beneath the veil of His human nature.

Who do you say that I am? Peter answers Jesus correctly: “You are the Messiah, the Anointed One.” But Peter does not yet understand what this means, that salvation will be achieved only if the Messiah undergoes suffering, rejection, and death. ***Who can blame Peter?*** He is simply speaking logic we can all understand: that suffering is a sign of weakness, not strength; that rejection can blot out what you do not want to hear; that death is the end of all hope. Human thinking alone, after all, cannot penetrate the mystery of the Cross or understand how Jesus will use our death to bring new life.

When Peter is confronted later in the high priest’s courtyard with the accusation: “You are one of that man’s disciples,” he declares, “I am not!” – words that become true at that moment, for his denial was just what Jesus had foretold, that the Messiah would be rejected. ***I AM, Jesus declares ...I am NOT, Peter says ... and in a mysterious way, that difference is our hope.*** For when we understand that we are not ... not sufficient unto ourselves, not perfect, not the masters of our future, not always faithful disciples, not capable of freeing ourselves from the sufferings, uncertainties, and evil we encounter – then we begin to grasp why Jesus alone is our hope, the One who can truly say, from all eternity ... I AM.

On this weekend of sorrowful remembrance of the tragedy that changed our world 20 years ago, and whenever we cannot understand, when we are fearful, when we feel lost, we realize: “Left to myself and my own strength, I am not.” ***But the eternal Word that will not pass away answers: “That is indeed so; but I AM.”***