



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"What Do People Say?"**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Zechariah 12:8-10; 13:1
Second Reading Galatians 3:23-29
Gospel Luke 9:18-24

"It doesn't matter what other people think about you; worry about what God thinks about you." That was the way I used to hear it. And then I read today's Gospel and heard Jesus ask his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" At first hearing that sounds like a very insecure question: it's as though Jesus is concerned about his reputation, his credibility. "Who do people say that I am?...*because I'm not sure!*" Of course, this question by Jesus is most often interpreted to mean that he is asking a *rhetorical* question, one that he already knows the answer to. That's how it sounds when we consider the next question he asks, "But who do *you* say that I am?" That certainly suggests that he is giving a *lesson* to his disciples: encouraging them to develop their own relationship with him independent of popular opinion. But I would also suggest that Jesus is learning from this experience, too.

I don't mean to take the fuzzy view that makes Jesus a kind of 60's flower child in search for the significance of the "inner voice of truth" that is his alone. Nor am I trying to paint him in the colors of the 90's supposed rediscovery of "pick 'n choose" cafeteria spirituality with or without organized religion. But I am looking at the evidence of the Scriptural record and realizing that for most of the Gospel writers, Jesus does seem to grow spirituality and personally as his earthly life and public

ministry progresses. He has an ever-clearer idea of his vocation and his destiny, and part of this comes from asking the question, "What do others think of me?"

Such an attitude in most regular human beings can be seductive and dangerous. *We* often choose to ask that question from a very different perspective than Jesus did and wind up trying to be and do things that please others, that make them *like* us, that portray us as always agreeable and (to use that awful, anemic word) "*nice*." At its most obvious, such behavior strikes us as insincere and ingratiating. But at its worst, it grows into an enormous, entrapping lie that we tell not only to others but eventually even to ourselves. We no longer know who we really are or who God means us to be because we have become merely a pastiche of others' options, constantly changing our image to fit the current views and taste: a monstrous and hollow thing and of no use to God.

Christ asks his disciples "Who do people say I am?" He poses this "opinion poll" not in order to change his approach or to vary his message to gain approval, but to learn how well the Gospel is being understood, first by the crowd and then by the inner circle of the disciples. The responses he hears are rather alarming, and it reminds us that democracy is not necessarily the best policy in politics or religion! The disciples report that some people are holding a view that clearly sounds Hindu or Buddhist: the teaching of the transmigration of the soul: reincarnation. They think that one of the "Big Name" prophets has returned from the dead: Elijah or even John the Baptist (which is very bizarre since people must have known that he had been contemporary with Jesus.) In other words, it's obviously a good idea that he checked this out before such ideas went any further: before people lost the idea that in him God was not just reliving the past, but doing something totally new. That is why there is that mysterious verse in today's Gospel in which Jesus commands to keep his identity *secret*: it was an idea of the Messiah that people just weren't ready for.

But this is a newness that is an eye-opener to Jesus, too. Although the Gospel of John tells us about the pre-existent Christ as the Logos and Son of God, most of the Gospel writings are not so presumptuous and speak rather of the Messiah, the Anointed One, as pursuing the life of a wandering teacher: showing the way to God

not through abstract teachings, but through personal example. I would make bold to suggest that by living out that example, Jesus himself grew in understanding of what his role as Messiah was to be. That is why his very next words to his disciples speak about the Cross and the Passion: things that became clearer to him as his ministry progressed. These were things that the Old Testament prophets *never* said about the Messiah, but which were destined to be the way that God's Anointed One would show most profoundly the plan of God for the world.

In our living out of the Christian life, we are also entitled to ask that loaded question, "Who do people say that I am?" but *not* so that we can stay popular and respected. Rather, we can ask the question in order to see how close we come to the real, authentic Christian answer. The best and final role of the Christian is not just to be true to him or her self- after all, some versions of our selves are just *not worthy being true to!* That is why Christ also tells us today to "take up our cross" in order to follow him, sacrificing the selfishness that puts us, falsely, in the center of the universe. A Christian's life is meant to be a *mirror*, reflecting Jesus to the world. It is in that way that we fulfill our calling, and ironically, discover the individual, unique person that Christ needs us to be in order to show just how universal his message, his life and his person can be. We are diamonds, unique and multifaceted, yet each reflecting a single light source which is God. Such is the Christian vocation: discovering ourselves as we discover that best of human rôle models, Jesus Christ Himself.

Becoming more like Christ, reflecting his image more clearly, is not something that happens through a single church rite or, usually, in one dramatic life-changing moment. Our spiritual development must be natural, careful and gradual- the way we want our children to grow and develop- by testing values, taking responsibility, and learning who God is through personal relationship. Feeling that we haven't achieved all of our goals yet is nothing to be ashamed of...as long as we continue on the best path we know towards God: a path shown to us by Christ in how he lived and what he taught and who he was.

Does it really, *really* matter what people think of us? Not if we are tempted to let them define us and make us over in their image or to pretend that someone else's

experience is our own. We have a much better, truer light to share, and we need to keep our reflection of that light bright and clear. That is who we, as Christians, are meant to be.

So how well are you doing in your rôle as reflection of Christ's light. Do people see a little bit of Jesus in you? Who do people say that *you* are?