

## **Weekly Reflections on the Sunday Gospel**

Bishop Daniel Mueggenborg

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### **TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

Our Scripture passage comes from the Gospel of Mark 8:27–35. In this reading we hear of Peter’s famous confession of faith. This confession is also recorded in the other Gospels of Matthew and Luke. More information and insights regarding this scene can be found by consulting the reflections on those texts (see Mt 16:13–28 and Lk 9:18–22). Let’s study Mark’s account to see what it offers us in our lives as disciples.

Jesus poses the most fundamental question to disciples when He asks, “Who do you say that I am?” In fact, the question of Jesus’ identity and authority is one of the most important themes of Mark’s entire Gospel and was first expressed in our Lord’s first miracle (Mk 1:21–28). Various people in Mark’s Gospel have tried to answer that question but their answers always fall short of capturing Jesus’ full identity. For some Jesus is a wonder worker and for others a teacher. Still others see him as a prophet. In this passage we read about Peter identifying Jesus as the Messiah and our Lord using the term “Son of Man” to speak of Himself. These titles give us insights not only into who Jesus is but also how we are to respond as His disciples. Who we believe Jesus is will determine how far we will go in following Him and what sacrifices we will be willing to make for the sake of discipleship. After all, who is willing to give up his life for a miracle worker? Or who would willingly accept crucifixion for a prophet? Jesus can make a radical claim on our lives only because He is the Son of God. When we reduce the Lord to anything less than God incarnate, we also diminish our necessary response as His disciples. Bishop Robert Barron has often commented that we must consider Jesus either as Lord, liar, or lunatic. The English scholar C.S. Lewis previously popularized this three-fold option when he wrote: I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. ... Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God.[1]

Jesus claims to be the Son of God and that claim has implications for our lives. If Jesus is not who He claims to be, there are only two options: Either He is a liar and attempting to deceive us, or He is a lunatic and delusional in His thinking. This is a serious question that every disciple must answer. Who we believe Jesus to be will have real implications for how we follow Him. Obviously we would not follow someone we believe to be a liar or a lunatic. If we are following someone we truly believe to be the Lord, we need to understand and accept the implications of

that belief. Namely, as Lord, Jesus has total claim to every part of our lives. He is Lord of our homes and our families. He is Lord of our marriages and of our businesses. He is Lord of our finances, sexuality, and politics. He is Lord of our leisure, our habits, and our friendships. Jesus asks each of us to answer this question as a fundamental act of our discipleship and subsequently to live out the consequences of that response. If we want to know what we really believe about Jesus, we only have to look at our lives and see how we are currently allowing Him, or not allowing Him, to affect us. This statement echoes the oracle of the Prophet Malachi in the Old Testament when he summoned the priests of Israel with these words, “A son honors his father and servants their master. If then I am a father, where is the respect due me? And if I am a master, where is the respect due me?” (Mal 1:6) Today’s Gospel also challenges each of us to answer the question of Jesus and to conform our life to that answer: “Who do you say that I am?”

What excuses do we give for acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God and then disregarding what the Lord teaches?

What parts of your life have you not yet submitted to the Lordship of Jesus?

What parts of your life do you most easily submit to the Lordship of Jesus?

Peter responds to Jesus’ question by confessing Him to be the Messiah (Christ). The term Messiah comes from Hebrew and means “The Anointed One”; the term Christ comes from Greek and means the same thing. Such people as priests, prophets, and kings were anointed in the Old Testament and were recognized as people who were given a divinely appointed task in the world. This idea of divine election (or appointment) was for the purpose of accomplishing God’s will. Thus, many people could have been anointed in this way and the term could have referred to any person who was acting on God’s behalf. One form of Judaism during the time of Jesus did hope for a unique “anointed one” who would restore the Davidic kingship and the wellbeing of the Jewish people. This expectation would have been a natural threat to the established civic and religious authorities. It appears that Peter understood Jesus in this way and that explains why Jesus immediately cautioned the disciples in Mark 8:30 not to tell anyone what they had heard. Still, Peter’s confession actually falls short of confessing Jesus’ truest identity.

Yes, He is the Anointed one of God, but He is much more than that. Peter fails to grasp that Jesus is actually the Son of God. We live in a culture that esteems certain people for their fame, wealth, and success. In a real way they are the ones we consider anointed by God. Perhaps they are athletes who are paid large salaries or musicians who make it to the top of the pop music charts. Any time we think someone is chosen in a special way, which warrants our attention, esteem, and admiration, we are responding to them as an “anointed one”. Sometimes we will even find ourselves “following” such a person by wearing t-shirts bearing their identification or pursuing information about them in the media. Sometimes, too, these people can be consulted for their political, economic, and moral opinions as though they were authorities whose teachings should guide our beliefs. Whenever any person occupies such a role in our lives other than Jesus, we have chosen a secular messiah instead of the Lord.

To whose opinions (political, economic, or moral) does the media appeal as a “chosen one” in an effort to guide your beliefs?

For whom would you reduce your prayer life in order to spend time with that person?

How do you know when you have made someone into a false messiah?

How do you know when someone is really anointed by God for a special task in the world? What is the task God has anointed you to do in His name?

The passage then relates the mutual rebuke of Peter and Jesus. The term “rebuke” is strong and was used in previous situations of demonic possession. It is important to remember that the Gospels present the ministry of Jesus as a struggle between the Kingdom of God and that of Evil. To rebuke someone is to identify them as being on the side of evil. Following Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah, our Lord taught the necessity of His Suffering, Death, and Resurrection. Peter did not believe this reality to be part of God’s plan and so Peter attempts to rebuke Jesus because he thinks that our Lord is actually expressing an evil statement and is on the wrong side of the struggle. In return, Jesus rebukes Peter and identifies him as “Satan” while instructing Peter to “get behind me”. This rebuke is most instructive.

For Peter, it means that he has unwittingly become the voice of Satan who is tempting the Lord to reject the necessity of suffering as a result of faithful witness to the Father’s will. Peter could not accept that the Messiah should suffer and die. Perhaps Peter did not want to follow such a Messiah because it could mean his own personal suffering. Whatever the reason, Peter clearly tries to deter Jesus from pursuing what our Lord knows to be His divinely appointed mission. In response to this temptation, Jesus instructs Peter to “get behind me”. This command is not a banishment, but rather an instruction in discipleship. Peter can only be a disciple when he follows the Lord and not when he tries to lead the Lord (Mk 1:16–18). Jesus is identifying the problem by which Peter has ended up on the wrong side of the struggle between the Kingdom of God and Evil: Peter tried to lead without first following. This is a very important lesson for us as disciples. Sometimes we find ourselves in situations of leadership, and it can be easy to forget that we are first and foremost disciples. We can lead as only we follow. Before anyone can be an apostle who leads others, that person must first be a disciple who is constantly following Jesus. When we try to become a leader of others without following the Lord, we risk seeking our own will rather than the will of God. That erroneous pursuit of self-will means that we can end up on the wrong side of the struggle between the Kingdom of God and Evil.

Following Jesus means that we are willing to go wherever the Lord leads. That willingness requires following the Lord even when it means persecution and suffering as a result of witnessing our faith. An old story is told about Peter fleeing the city of Rome to avoid martyrdom at the hands of civil leaders. On his way out of the city, he encounters the Risen Lord and Peter asks him, “Quo vadis?” (Where are you going?), to which the Lord replied, “Romam eo iterum crucifigit” (I am going to Rome to be crucified again). After hearing this, the story says that Peter gained courage, turned around, and returned to the city where he was eventually crucified upside down.[2] In this gospel passage we see that Peter did not want Jesus to accept suffering and death because Peter did not want to embrace those things in his life. The cross is the inevitable consequence of faithful witness. It is our natural aversion to suffering, rejection, and persecution that tempts us to not follow Jesus when discipleship begins to require sacrifice.

What part of my life am I afraid to lose if I make a radical commitment to follow Jesus?  
What am I holding onto with such attachment that I am not free to follow where the Lord leads?

What sacrifice am I prepared to make for the sake of following Jesus?

How do I try to find alternative methods of resolving situations so I do not have to face persecution or rejection as a result of Christian witness?

Is there a cross in my life that I need to bear today?

When are you tempted to interpret an experience of suffering as something that is necessarily evil?