

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

(Isaiah 50:5-9a; James 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-35)

Excerpts from *Father Raniero Cantalamessa* – 15 Sept 2006

by Father Charles Fillion

12 September 2021

Brothers and sisters, “Who Do You Say That I Am?” When I was in Cooks Creek, I had a parishioner that refused to say that I was his pastor. Being surrounded by protestant churches, I do understand. But it is my title: I am the pastor of this parish. But you don’t call me Pastor Charles; it is Father Charles. You don’t call me simply Charles or certainly not Fillion. I had a secretary that called me Father Fillion. I know it was out of respect, but it’s a little too official for me.

It is only in three Gospels, Matthew, Mark & Luke, that we find the episode of Jesus when, in Caesarea Philippi he asked his apostles what people thought of him. The common fact in the three Gospels is Peter’s response: “You are the Christ.” Matthew adds: “the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16) which could, however, be a manifestation due to the faith of the Church after Easter.

Soon the title “Christ” became Jesus’ second name. It is mentioned more than 500 times in the New Testament, almost always in the composite form “Jesus Christ” or “Our Lord Jesus Christ.” However, it was not so in the beginning. Between Jesus and Christ, a verb was understood: “Jesus is the Christ.” To say “Christ” was not to call Jesus by his name, but to make an affirmation about him.

Christ, we know, is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Mashiah, or Messiah, and both mean “anointed”. The term derives from the fact that in the Old Testament kings, prophets and priests, at the moment of their election, were consecrated through an anointing with perfumed oil. But increasingly in the Bible there clearly is talk of a special anointed or a consecrated one who will come in the end times to fulfill God’s promises of salvation to his people. It is the so-called biblical messianism, which takes on different tones according to how the Messiah is seen as a future king (royal emphasis) or as Daniel’s son of man (apocalyptic emphasis).

The whole primitive tradition of the Church is unanimous in proclaiming that Jesus of Nazareth is the awaited Messiah. He himself, according to Mark, will proclaim himself such before the Sanhedrin. To the question of the High Priest: “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” He replies: “I am” (Mark 14:61 ff.). So much more confusing, therefore, is the continuation of Jesus’ dialogue with the disciples in Caesarea Philippi: “And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.” However, the motive is clear. Jesus accepts being identified with the awaited Messiah, but not with the idea that Judaism had made for itself of the Messiah.

In the prevailing opinion, the Messiah was seen as a political and military leader who would liberate Israel from pagan dominion and establish the kingdom of God on earth by force. Jesus had to profoundly correct this idea, shared by his own apostles, before allowing them to talk of him as the Messiah. To this end is oriented the discourse that follows immediately: “He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering.”

The harsh word addressed to Peter, which seeks to remove him from such thoughts: “Get behind me, Satan!” is identical with that addressed to the tempter of the desert. In both cases, in fact, it is about the same attempt to deflect him from the path that the Father has indicated to him - that of the suffering servant - to another which is “according to humans, not according to God”. Salvation will come from the sacrifice of himself, from “giving his life in ransom for many”, not from the elimination of the enemy. In this way, from a temporal salvation one passes to an eternal salvation, from a particular salvation -- destined for only one people -- one passes to a universal salvation.

Regrettably we must state that Peter’s error has been repeated in history. Also, certain men of the Church, and even Successors of Peter, have behaved at certain times as if the Kingdom of God was of this world and should be affirmed with the victory (if necessary, also with arms) over enemies, instead of doing so with suffering and martyrdom. The situation has not changed. Still today, people have very diverse opinions on Jesus: a prophet, a great teacher, a great personality. It has become fashionable to present Jesus in shows, movies and novels, through the strangest means and messages.

In the Gospel, Jesus does not seem to be surprised by people’s opinions, nor does he take time to deny them. He only poses a question to his disciples, and he does so also today: “For you, who am I for you?” A leap must be taken that does not come from the flesh or from blood, but is a gift of God which must be accepted through the gentleness of an interior light from which faith is born.

Every day there are men and women who take this leap. Sometimes it is famous people. But infinitely more numerous are the unknown believers. At times nonbelievers take these conversions as weakness, sentimental crises or a search for popularity, and it might be that in some cases it is so. But it would be a lack of respect of the conscience of the rest to cast discredit on every story of conversion. One thing is certain: Those who have taken this leap will not go back for anything in the world, and more than that, they are surprised to have been able to live for so long without the light and strength that comes from faith in Christ.

Now it’s your turn to answer: “Who do you say Jesus is?”