

Commentary to the Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time - A -



Without the 19th century essayist Charles Lamb, William Shakespeare would be Missing in Action. It was Lamb's essays that snatched the 17th century playwright from obscurity after he was famous for Andy Warhol's fifteen minutes.

One night Lamb and his guests were chatting about Bill Shakespeare over Madeira port and illegal Cuban cigars. "Supposing," one asked Lamb, "Shakespeare were to stroll into our dining room at this moment." The essayist replied, "We would raise a glass of port to the great man." "Supposing," asked another, "Jesus were to come here." Lamb answered, "We would get down on our knees."

There is the difference between the Man from Nazareth and other great people you can think of. The Christ is God and all others, no matter what their deeds, are but actors strutting on the stage for a brief time and then exiting.

When today's Gospel opens, Jesus was in Caesarea Philippi in the northeastern corner of Palestine. There the FBI and paparazzi would not look for Him. This was not His usual territory. The sand in His clock was running out. A barbaric cross awaited Him. Yet, He had much to teach the twelve before He could give them their theology doctorates. This was quality classroom time.

This, too, is one of the most decisive periods in Christ's life. Though He was aware of His divinity, were His own people equally aware? He realized He had a rendezvous to keep with His executioners.

Thus, He had to know whether the apostles had any inkling whom they were traveling with. The right answer to His question would make His day, even His life. The wrong answer would mean He was a loser. Three years of hard work would go down the tubes.

So, He put the question to them that went to the heart of the matter, "Who do you say I am?" Imagine how His skin must have crawled with pleasure when Peter acting as spokesman for the others told Him He was "the Son of the living God."

Surely neither Peter nor any of the apostles with the possible exception of the young and sharp John could have given a precise theological explanation of that accolade. But every mother's son of them knew in his guts that the highest human terms one could think of were totally inadequate to categorize their Leader. He was an original.

It is not enough to learn what others, even apostles, say about the Teacher. One could write an encyclopedia about the Christ and still not be a card-carrying Christian. One might spellbind one's friends by telling them about all the thousands of volumes written on the eternal Galilean and still not be a believer. Jewish theologians have written beautifully on Jesus, but they do not believe. (William Barclay)

To each baptized, Jesus leans over and whispers, "But YOU...who do YOU say I am?" That question will never go away.

In their artistic works, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Georges Rouault, Franco Zeffirelli. Andrew Lloyd Webber, and Mel Gibson have all given their answers to the Master's searing question.

Now it is our turn to step up to the plate and take a swing. The Nazarene must forever be one's discovery. Our knowledge of Him can never be something that stays in a closet. It must be outed. Christianity does not mean memorizing the Nicene Creed. Rather, it does mean knowing our Saviour.

Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, assassinated in 1980 while defending Jesus, said eloquently: "Christianity is not a collection of truths to be believed or laws to be obeyed. Rather, Christianity is a person. Christianity is Christ."

Governor Pilate asked Jesus if He was in fact the King of the Jews. Christ, though exhausted and barely able to stand, shot back a query like an automatic machine gun, "Does this question come from you or have others told you about me?" (John 18:34)

When St Paul was writing to young Timothy on his word processor, he did not write, "I know what I have believed." Rather he typed in his best hunt and peck manner, "I know WHOM I have believed." (2 Timothy 1:12)

We must join to our belief John's text of Christ that says, "Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do." Like Christ, we must turn the community about us upside down. True faith produces a life full of actions, not a head full of facts; Christ came not to make us feel good but to do good. (Unknown)

If we bypass the question "Who is Christ?" by saying, "Let's talk about me instead!", we trivialize Christ's challenge to us.

Are you a follower of Jesus or just a distant admirer? (Unknown)

Fr James Gilhooley