

In today's Gospel (Mark 8:27-35) we reach a true watershed in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus explicitly raises with his disciples the issue of his identity. As readers of Saint Mark's Gospel, during this Year B of the three year Sunday Mass readings cycle, we have known from the start that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of God" (1:1). But this has been concealed from all other participants in the drama save Jesus himself. As Jesus' ministry in the cities and towns of Galilee unfolded, the disciples have wrestled with the question that they voice immediately after he has calmed the sea, "Who is this, then, that even the winds and the sea obey him?" (4:41). People have been struck by the authority of his teaching and by his powerful works of healing and exorcism (1:22, 27). Ironically, only the demons, feeling the force of his power, acknowledge his identity as Son of God.

Now, however, the moment has come for Jesus to draw from the disciples an explicit acknowledgment of his identity as Messiah. So, when Jesus puts the question directly to them, it is not surprising that Peter as spokesperson for the group gets it right: "You are the Christ (the Messiah)".

Concerning the identity of Jesus, the Church speaks of the three-fold *munera* of Christ - those of prophet or teacher, priest or sanctifier, and king or ruler. The core of Jesus' identity as Messiah or Saviour is his priesthood. He is not like the messiah the first century Jews of his time were expecting, a great priest-king and ruler who would restore the temple in Jerusalem and lead them to victory and domination over their worldly enemies. He was the one who had come, "not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. (10:45) Christ's priestly identity is unique because his is an eternal priesthood, unique because in the sacrifice he offers to God the Father for the forgiveness of our sins and for our salvation, he is himself both the priest AND the victim.

Jesus neither confirms nor applauds Peter's response to the question of his identity. Instead, he strictly enjoins the disciples not to pass on this knowledge to anyone else and then goes on immediately to speak – for the first of several times in the Gospel – of his coming suffering and death. The knowledge that he is Messiah is not to be separated for a moment from the kind of Messiah he is destined to be: not one who will be served and honoured, as is customary in the case of rulers of this world, but one who is, yes, "to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45).

For the remainder of the Gospel, the disciples will have to wrestle – quite unsuccessfully as it turns out – with holding together two truths concerning Jesus: on the one hand, that he is indeed the long-awaited Messiah; on the other hand, that he will fulfil his messianic role by entering into the pain and suffering of this world, even to the point of death. This is something totally unforeseen in Jewish messianic expectation - that God in Jesus would enter into solidarity with human suffering.

The fact that Peter initially got something so splendidly right in recognising Jesus as the long awaited Messiah, but then stumbles so badly at the thought of a suffering Messiah, can be, nonetheless, an encouragement for us – a recognition in the gospels that we all do badly at

suffering. At the climax of Saint Mark's gospel, the disciples – the male disciples at least – failed miserably, as they ran away from Jesus in his hour of suffering and death. (But that wasn't the real end of the story. God's power triumphed over human weakness and failure in the resurrection and sent his Spirit into them at the Pentecost).

Through our own weakness and the resulting abuse of our freedom, we can get ourselves into an impossible bind. Seeking primarily pleasure or status or power over others, sin wrecks us in such a fundamental way that we become dysfunctional. But until we truly feel what it means to be lost and helpless, we will not appreciate who Jesus is for us. We will not experience who he fundamentally is in relation to us. We will not know him first and foremost as our SAVIOUR.

Jesus is someone who has rescued us, saved us, from sin and death and restored our life in him, i.e. our real life. He has done something that we could never, even in principle, do for ourselves.

The psalmist says:

“How gracious is the Lord, and just;  
our God has compassion.  
The Lord protects the simple hearts;  
I was helpless so he saved me.” (Psalm 114)

The critical questions are, of course, who is Jesus for me and who is Jesus for us?

Despite its hugely paradoxical nature, Saint Paul's statement, “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience, so that He may have mercy on all” (Rom. 11:32) still rings true during certain phases of our lives. This imprisonment of disobedience can be a school where we learn of the incredible power and energy of God's inexhaustible love and mercy for each of us, through his Spirit moving in us, always trying to draw us back to life in Him. This is real life, a life lived in Spirit and in Truth (Jn. 4:24) and it is only possible because of the life, suffering death and resurrection of the Son of God Jesus Christ, Jesus the Messiah, who truly is our one and only SAVIOUR.