

Jesus Questions
Homily of August 21, 2005
by Fr. Brian Joyce

You know, we have all heard that gospel before, probably dozens of times. Jesus asks, “Who do people say that I am? ...Who do you say that I am?” Peter steps up and gives the answer, and Jesus says, “Peter, you’re right. You’ve got it. You get an A+. You get a gold star. You get to move on to final jeopardy” ... which next week, he moves on to, and the next question he gets completely wrong and Jesus calls him, “you Satan, you devil.” And then, at the end, Jesus says, “Don’t tell anybody I’m the Christ. Whatever you do, don’t do that!”

Well, despite it being so familiar, and so routine, during this week I had one striking conversation and one amazing comment about this text that threw a lot of light on it for me. One came from a man by the name of Jack Elliott and the other from Paula D’Arcy. Jack Elliott is an ordained Lutheran minister, a Scripture professor. Until his retirement a few years ago he was Professor of Scripture at USF in San Francisco. And Jack, the Scripture scholar, said to me, “You know, a large number of serious students of the Bible think this statement of Jesus, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ was not a test. It was not an exam, and it was not a trick question. He was not testing his friends and apostles. He was really seeking to find out about himself, who he was and where he was going and he was looking for a little help from his friends. He was honestly asking for help to the question from those around him, ‘Who am I? Where am I headed? What does God want for me? What is God’s will?’ “

It reminds me of the opening scene in the book “The Last Temptation of Christ” by Kazantzakis, also in the movie. Jesus has a terrible migraine headache and he is agonizing over the fact that he doesn’t seem to fit in his culture, in his society, in his tribe. He is agonizing over the fact that his relatives say that he is daft. They say, “This guy is crazy.” He is agonizing over the fact that a lot of the neighbors think that he’s a loser. Wait til you see this kid grow up. He is going to be a loser! Now, if you imagine Jesus as not only Son of God and divine, but also as not just fully human but super-human, that from his first breath in Bethlehem, he had all the information, all the inside knowledge, then this doesn’t make sense to you. But if you accept the Orthodox Christian belief in Jesus and the Catholic belief in Jesus that, while he was son of God, he was also fully human, a normal human being, like us in everything except sin, then it makes a lot of sense. Think about it. If he were absolutely certain from Day 1 who he was, where he was going, and how he was going to get there, that is not normal. That is not natural and that is not human and that is not our Christian belief. Doesn’t being human mean having all kinds of questions? I mean, how did it work for you? What am I going to be when I grow up? What courses should I take? What job or career should I follow? Who am I anyway? Or what’s my vocation? What is

God calling me to?

We think about Jesus, like us, struggling, questioning, and above all being faithful to the God within. That's the first thing. I like to imagine he looks to his friends for a little help. He goes to Simon the Zealot. Remember Simon was what we would call today probably a guerilla fighter, a freedom fighter or a terrorist. And Simon Zealot says to him, "You've got great leadership skills. What you're going to do is be a political leader. You're going to bring a political revolution and get the Romans out of here. That's what you are going to do." And Jesus says, "I don't think so... I don't think so." And then he goes to Judas, another friend. This guy's smart. "Who do you say I am?" And Judas says, "You're a great preacher and just look at the money coming in. You keep an eye on the pulpit and I'll keep an eye on the collection." And Jesus says, "I don't think so. And by the way, fellas, if this is what you think I am, don't tell anybody that I am the Christ." And Peter comes along and simply says, "You know, whatever else you are struggling with, Jesus, you are a child of God. Don't ever forget it. Don't ever forget it." And Jesus says, "Thank you, Peter. That's a big help. That is a big help!" Now, a little later, Jesus says. "If I am a child of God and if I follow what God wants me to do, I'm going to end up suffering and probably dying." Peter says, "No, no. That will never happen." And Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan. You're not the rock. You're the devil. Get out of here. I don't think so."

Now, the lesson for us is that every day we are children of God. Every day we are children of a loving God who gives us gifts. And we have to ask, "Are we living up to it? Are we living up to our call, up to the gifts we have, up to our vocation?" And we can think of our vocation for our life or, just for today, what's my vocation? You want to ask the risen Lord Jesus who is not puzzled at all, the risen Lord, "Who do you say that I am, Lord?" That's what Jack Elliott told me in that conversation, or made me think anyway.

Paula D'Arcy: Paula D'Arcy shared with us here her journey as a therapist to Morrie Schwartz. Now that's the famous Morrie who, in facing ALS and death, when it was chronicled in a book, "Tuesdays With Morrie," became a national best seller and a wonderful film. Morrie was Jewish. He grew up in New York and suffered a lot of anti-Semitism. Paula said that, in one of their very first, earliest meetings, he asked her, "Are you a Christian?" When she said, "Yes." he said, "You will never, never, never mention Christ in my presence. Got it?" She said, "I got it. Clear... I got it." Six months later, he said to her, "Will you tell me all you know about Christ?" And a few weeks later they were praying together. But the point is how this man, who is facing himself with honesty and genuineness and facing death, how did he ask her? He said, "Tell me everything you know about Jesus, not what you've read, not what you've been told, not what you've been taught, but in your life, who is Christ? In your life, what does Christ mean? How has Christ touched your life?" How would you like to be asked that by someone who is dying? But there's our homework. In fact, there's our life's work.

Jack Elliott's challenge: "Who am I really? Where am I going? What is my call? What are my gifts today? What is my vocation?" And Paula D'Arcy's challenge (Or maybe it's Morrie's challenge): Who do I say Christ is? Not what I've read, not what I've been told, but in my own

life, who is Christ for me? Those are hard questions, valuable questions for our spirituality, for our daily lives, for our prayer lives, for who we are. Those are important questions, questions worth asking again and again and again. Amen.