

A few random things. I want to announce to you all that I got called 'pretty' this past week. Well actually the full statement was 'you're pretty annoying,' but I only focus on positive things. The person who said this was my older sister. She is an idiot. I finally realized recently that I've been in and out of therapy my whole life -- to learn how to deal with people who SHOULD BE in therapy! I always knew I'd get old. How fast it happened has been a bit of a surprise, though. Have you ever wondered if clouds look down on us and say "Hey look -- that one is shaped like an idiot!" I am starting to think I will never be old enough to know better! And finally, I'm living proof that you're only young once -- but you can be immature forever!

OK, now for some background on this fascinating gospel text. It is no accident that Jesus asked His disciples this huge question about who He is in this region of Caesarea Philippi. On the hills overlooking the city was a magnificent white temple built in honor of the Roman emperor, Caesar. Like all rulers of his day, Caesar was worshiped as a god. This area was also the center of worship for the Phoenician god, Baal, and the Greek god, Pan. History, religion, politics all came together in this one region to exalt many different gods. Each one of these 'gods' was known for having special powers, for being able to grant special favors to their followers. Everywhere the citizens looked, there were massive monuments to pagan gods, like the goddess of vengeance or the god of nature. In fact, there was a certain cave in this region that was thought to be the entrance to the underworld, where pagan believers imagined that dark powers reigned. Pigs sacrificed on the pagan altars were often thrown into the lake at the mouth of this cave.

So the disciples' would have been extremely uncomfortable as they passed through this area. These men were devout Jews who were warned all their lives to stay away from the uncleanness, the condemnation of the pagan lifestyle. Here they were surrounded on all sides by evidence that many of their neighbors worshiped sensuous and craven gods other than Yahweh. And in this setting Jesus asked them a provocative question, "Who do people say I am?" They had no idea what He was getting at, but they responded, "Some say John the Baptist; others Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." They were going in the right direction. But it was time to lay it all on the line. It was time to get right to the heart of the matter. "But what about you?" He asked, "Who do you say that I am?"

I imagine that all the hosts of heaven held their breath. For just a moment, time stood still. The fate of humanity rested on the answer. And who should answer, but the headstrong young fisherman named Peter. "You are the Christ," he announced. And the angels in heaven shouted "Hooray!" OKAY, the Bible does not actually say that they shouted "Hooray"! but I think that's what they did. Now that's just my opinion. My humble opinion. My humble but CORRECT opinion! The plan of God, the one that was set in motion before the world even began, was now coming to fulfillment.

But Jesus didn't stop with Peter's answer. Here's something that we have to notice about gods, particularly pagan gods. Every god required a sacrifice. That was obvious in a place like Caesarea Philippi. If Jesus really is the Christ, then what kind of sacrifice does He ask? Verse 31 reads: "He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and after three days rise again." And here is what is so odd about God -- He announces that He will be killed, but on the third day He will be raised up. While Christ will ask for a sacrifice from us, He has first given a sacrifice, and He Himself IS that sacrifice. (all of this adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, July-Sept 2006, author not specified) He loved us first before He ever asked us to love Him in return.

Second, the answer about who Jesus is, will always remain a mystery. And like all mysteries, it is full of paradox. If we are ever in doubt about the true Catholic understanding of almost anything, the correct answer is unlikely to be either-or but more likely both-and. A paradox. For only paradox is big enough to even BEGIN to articulate something of the mystery of the living God. We will only save our lives if we lose them. In the cross there is glory. Death leads to life. Paradox. For instance, how do we recognize the authentic voice of God in our lives? Does God speak in whispers or in thunder? Does God speak in pain or in blessing? Does God call us out of this world or more deeply into it? Does God call us through what is comfortable and familiar or does God call us into foreign spaces and places? Does God disturb us or comfort us? Is God recognized in miracles or in helplessness? Does God speak through the rich or through the poor, through the educated or the uneducated? Does God's voice frighten us or rid us of fear? Is God's voice heard more through piety or nature? Does God ask us to renounce the pleasures of this world or does God ask us to enjoy them? God's voice is in ALL of these things. God's voice is heard in paradox.

The voice of God is recognized both in whispers and soft tones, even as it is recognized in thunder and storm. God spoke to Elijah in a soft breeze, but to Pharaoh through the plagues. The voice of God is recognized wherever we see life, joy, health, color, and humor, even as it is recognized wherever we see dying, suffering, poverty, and a beaten-down spirit. God is equally present on Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

The voice of God is recognized in what calls us to what's higher, to what sets us apart, to what invites us to holiness, even as it calls us to humility, invites us to submerge our individuality into humanity, and rejects everything that denigrates our humanity. The voice of God calls us out of what's purely human even as it invites us to humbly take our place within humanity. The voice of God is recognized in what appears in our lives as 'foreign,' as other, as 'stranger' or 'illegal,' even as it is recognized in the voice that is most deeply familiar and which beckons us home. God's voice takes us beyond any language we know even as we recognize it most deeply in our mother tongue.

The voice of God is the one that most challenges us, even as it is the only voice that ultimately soothes and comforts us. God's voice comforts the disturbed and disturbs the comfortable. It also comforts the comforted and disturbs the disturbed. The voice of God enters our lives as the greatest of all powers, even as it forever lies in vulnerability, like a helpless baby in a manger. God's voice creates the cosmos and keeps it in existence, even as it lies in our world powerless as an infant in diapers. The voice of God is heard in a privileged way in the poor, even as it beckons us through the voice of the artist and the intellectual and the poet. God is in the poor, even as the artist and intellectual and poet help reveal the transcendental properties of God. The voice of God is recognized inside the gifts of the Holy Spirit, even as it invites us never to deny the complexities of our world and our own lives. The voice of God is always heard wherever there is genuine enjoyment and gratitude, even as it asks us to deny ourselves, die to ourselves, pick up our cross and follow in Christ's footsteps.

To accept who Christ is, is to accept who God is, and that is to accept living with ambiguity, complexity, unknowing, and a whole lot of patience. God's voice is never as clear as our fundamentalist instinct would like, but it will be free both to soothe and challenge us as never before. (adapted from Rolheiser, Posting of 4/18/2018)

Third, so how DO we answer who Jesus is for us? I read this when I was in seminary and I have returned to it repeatedly over the years. Perhaps you might find it a moving answer to help in your own articulation of your answer -- as I have in my own attempt to respond with my life to this question that defines our lives. This was penned by Fr. Gerald O'Collins, one of my favorite Jesuit professors, an Australian who continues to write in his 90's. He wrote: "Jesus picks up where his cousin John left off: 'The time is fulfilled,

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and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel' (Mk 1:15). Jesus begins to talk of human obedience towards God with a deep moral earnestness. He knows as well as anyone that death will submerge every earthly task or interest – sacred or secular. But without a trace of morbid contempt He faces the whole of life, and disdains nothing for being transient. The full span of human experience matters to Him: a farmer trudging up and down as he sows his crop, sparrows seen fluttering dead to the ground, a boy who takes his money and runs away from home, a poor widow making her small contribution to the temple funds, kings planning a military campaign, business men unable to repay loans. Jesus neither despises nor discards any person or any activity, and brings His good news to bear upon it. He assures His audience that nothing of our human reality lacks worth and value in the sight of God: 'The very hairs on your head are numbered!' (Lk 12:7) (O'Collins, THE CALVARY CHRIST, p. 27)

All of our lives, my friends, will be our answer to who we say Jesus Christ is. May our answer be true – and full – and beautiful – strong, loving and wise -- as is the love with which He has first loved us. Amen.