

My Brothers and Sisters,

In today's Gospel, Jesus asks his disciples who people say that he is. They respond that some say that he is John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the other prophets. He then asks them the critical question, "*But who do you say that I am?*" Peter answers for all them, "*You are the Christ.*" However, in Matthew's Gospel, Peter gives a more complete answer, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*" [16:16; NJB]. Who is Jesus? Jesus is Son of God and Savior.

To understand this passage, it is important to understand that when Jesus changed the question from who others said he was to who they said he was, it became clear that Jesus was not looking for a theoretical or academic answer to the question. He was not asking them to profess faith in a dogma. Rather he was asking them to profess faith in him. In other words, he was asking, "Who am I to you?" All the recent Popes, at least since Saint Pope John Paul II, have emphasized that faith in Jesus involves a personal encounter with the person of Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior.

If today's Gospel suggests the meaning of Christian faith, today's reading from the Apostle James takes up the question of the relationship between faith and good works. This is a question that has divided Catholics and many non-Catholic Christians for centuries. For centuries, basing themselves on St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, many non-Catholic Christians have typically argued that we are saved by faith alone. Good works count for nothing. We Catholics, on the other hand, have stressed the importance of both faith and good works. According to St. James, "*So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*"

However, when we talk about faith and works, to what are we referring? In his First Letter, St. John gives the best answer: "*And his commandment is this: we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us*" [3:23]. In other words, God's one commandment is to believe in Jesus and to love one another as Jesus commanded us. He commanded us to "*...love one another as I love you,*" [15:12] i.e., with a self-revealing, self-giving, self-sacrificing love.

After Peter professed faith in Jesus, Jesus began to openly prophesy his suffering and death. Peter then rebuked Jesus, to which Jesus responded, "*Get behind me, Satan! You are thinking not as God thinks, but as human beings do.*" We are so like Peter. How many times have we been disappointed when God did not act in the way we thought he should be acting? How many times have we been disappointed when God did not stop bad things from happening to good people? How many times have we been disappointed when the bad seem to be rewarded for their bad behavior? How many times have we been disappointed that God did not demonstrate his power to the world? As Jesus said to Peter, when we think this way, we are not thinking as God thinks but as human beings think. God did not even intervene to deliver Jesus from the cross. Jesus did not come down from the cross even when people said they would believe in him if he did.

My brothers and sisters, at the end of today's Gospel, Jesus tells us, "*Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.*" Taking up our cross and following in the footsteps of Jesus means dealing with what life deals us. Because of all the chaos in the Church right now, all of us in the Catholic Church are carrying a particularly heavy cross. Just as Simon the Cyrenian helped carry the cross of Christ, we all need to help each other carry our crosses by supporting one another in faith, love, and hope.