

Pro-Cathedral / Donnybrook

12 September 2021

Welcome

As we know from our experience of family and friendship, being able to ask the right question at the right time can be both illuminating and liberating. At the heart of today's Gospel, stands a great question: but you, who do you say I am? There are other related questions which are close to it but not quite identical, such as, What is Christianity? Why am I still a Christian? What keeps me in the faith community, the church? The question in today's Gospel is not about "philosophy" or "religion" or "ethics" but about a person: Jesus of Nazareth.

Topic

A personal answer to a personal question will have to be, well, personal, while acknowledging both our past experience and our present context.

Steps

Countless books have been written about Jesus the historical figure and in the last thirty years there's been an exponential growth. These are attempts to understand Jesus in the context of his time – a human being, a Jew, a prophet, a teacher, a figure who finds a place in the explosive events of the first century of our era.

Often, scholars underestimate the sheer attractiveness of the figure of Jesus: his joyfulness, his penetrating teaching, his compassion, his freedom, his capacity to cut through nonsense, including religious nonsense, his vision of a renewed humanity and, above all, his vision of God as Abba, father. We who are drawn to Jesus should begin our answer to the question by acknowledging our own attraction to Jesus of Nazareth.

When we come to reflect on the person of Jesus, we all carry with us images inherited from culture, church and personal experience. It is no harm to remember that all these are culturally embedded images, bearing the stamp of the times they were produced. A simple example would be the spread of the image of the Sacred Heart, for example. In its current form, it is chiefly from 19th century France, with older roots. The risk of much devotional art is that it does not challenge but merely warms.

Today there is a rich variety of contemporary images – such as Sieger Köder, from Germany, Arcabas from France or our own Patrick Pye. The rich variety goes back to the New Testament itself. For example, each Gospel offers its own portrait of Jesus. In Matthew, Jesus is a kind of rabbi. In Luke, a prophet. In John, the revealer. In Mark, the first Gospel, the suffering servant, the Messiah whose destiny is the cross. Although these are not to be blended, we can learn from each. Probably at different stages in our lives, different perspectives will appear to us.

Different times see Jesus in their own image. To get close to what Jesus was really like, we often need to peel away century of tradition. The reassuringly Western images are

not really helpful. What seems clear now is that Jesus was not a white, blue-eyed Caucasian, with regular features we find culturally appealing. He was from first-century Palestine, a manual labourer from an insignificant village and he was a Jew all his life.

One very famous writer ended his exhaustive research about Jesus in the last century with the moving words: (Albert Schweitzer).

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

In other words, we will discover the identity of Jesus once we take the risk of discipleship – surely the teaching of today's Gospel as well.

Conclusion

In his first encyclical, Pope Benedict wrote: Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.

The personal encounter with Jesus is at the heart of who we are as Christians – both as horizon and as direction. In the setting of real discipleship can we begin perhaps to answer the question: who do *you* say I am?