

Over the past few months, listening to the Gospel of Mark, we've heard various groups of people give their opinion of Jesus. Evil spirits declared him to be the Holy One of God. The Pharisees called him a lawbreaker. At Nazareth they rejected him, because they could only see him as the Carpenter's son. He was called Son of David by the woman who wanted him to heal her daughter, while in last Sunday's gospel, after he had cured the man who was deaf and dumb, they praised him for doing all things well.

It is in that context that in today's Gospel Jesus asks the question: "Who do people say I am?" and, "What about you, who do you say I am?" It's not that Jesus was experiencing an identity crisis. He knew exactly who he was, but at that stage it was important that the Apostles clarified their thinking as well. The answer Peter gives, here in Mark's Gospel, is a telling one, for it is rather ambiguous. "You are the Christ", or "You are the Anointed One", carries with it all the baggage of the Old Testament, where, on the one hand, the Messiah was described as another David, who would restore political greatness to Israel, while on the other hand you had passages like we heard in our first reading today, where Isaiah speaks about the Messiah as a suffering servant, who will take all the flack that is meted out to him, but will not allow that to divert him from the path of truth.

It is pretty obvious that Peter suffered from an inclination that afflicts almost all of us. He put more faith in the rosy stories than in the painful ones. God could not possibly want his Anointed One to suffer, so he opted for the political dream. But, that is where Jesus corrects him almost brutally, by saying: "Got behind me, Satan, because the way you think is not God's way, but man's."

The present Football Finals afford us a rather good example of that dream. All teams can dream of winning the trophy, convincing themselves that with enough exercise they're in pretty good shape. The fact is, of course, that behind every team, every player or athlete in the competition, there stand thousands of others who have spent years of competing in their chosen sport, have spent months of training every day, and still they weren't good enough to make the team. Those who have made it have been able to do

so, only because they have been prepared to face the pain, the exhaustion, the disruption to their family and social life that their training demanded. They've had one goal in mind, and that's shaped everything they have done now for months on end, and even so they are not sure which team will walk away with the trophy. And yet, they think it's worth all the pain they've been through.

Today's Gospel question is also asked of us: "Who do we say Jesus is?" – "What is he to us?" But even more importantly, we ought to turn the question around as well: "Who do you say you are?" Who or what is it that drives you? What is the goal of your life that shapes your decisions? What is so important to your life that you make light of the pain that goes with its pursuit?

In today's Gospel Jesus tells us: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me." Jesus asks us to accept suffering as a necessary part of our life, but he is not asking us to be masochists, to seek suffering for the sake of suffering. In the Garden of Gethsemani, where he was overwhelmed by the suffering that was about to happen to him, he prayed: "Father, if it is possible let this cup pass me by. Yet not my will but yours be done." Jesus did not go looking for pain, but where it was the natural consequence of the position he took, he did not go out of its way. The path of truth meant that when others opposed him he did not water down his teaching, or moderate the demands which his principles called for, - like an athlete he stayed true to himself, and allowed the consequences of that position to happen.

And that is what he wants to find in us as well. That we have a goal, and accept the consequences of that goal, the effort we need to put in, the sacrifices we need to make, so that we can achieve what we have set our hearts on, which is our ultimate happiness with Him.

There are two questions, therefore, that should influence our reflection during this week. The question Jesus asked: "Who do you say I am?" or "What am I to you?" and "Who do you say you are?, Where is your centre?"

That is enough food for thought for quite a while!