

24th Sunday, Year B: Is 50:5-9; Ps 114:1-6, 8-9, R/V9. Jas 2:14-18; Mk 8-27-35.

When people we know fail to recognize us, usually we are disappointed. We like people to get our names right, if only for the purpose correct identification. Perhaps few of us would risk asking our friends “who do people think I am?” Hearing reports about what people say about us or how they see us can dishearten us, even alarm us. What if any of the answers match our own self understanding? When Jesus asks his disciples in today’s Gospel: who do people say I am, the answers all point to someone else, Elijah, John the Baptist, or one of the prophets. These were figures celebrated for pointing the way to the messiah. In contrast to what others think, Peter the impetuous apostle spoke up “you are the Christ, the Son of the living God”. Jesus is not numbered among those pointing to the messiah, he is the messiah.

In response to Peter’s confession, Jesus swears his apostles to silence. The traditional understanding of the title “messiah” was one of a spectacular figure who would accomplish victory for Israel over their oppressors and enemies by the use of military might, a conqueror who would never be touched by defeat or failure. This understanding is a world away from Jesus’ understanding of his own role. The cross would uncover the truth about who he really is. He speaks of himself as the son of man who must suffer and be rejected and be put to death. Rejection robs the suffering one of dignity. He has to face forsakenness. Whoever wishes to understand Jesus must look upon the figure of the suffering servant or suffering son of man. Peter could not understand this figure or image. He wants an invulnerable, victorious and strong messiah. But Jesus rejects the God of Peter’s dreams. When the passion of Jesus gets underway, Peter denied Jesus, his master. Jesus cautions “if anyone wants to be a follower of mind, he must.... Jesus compels no one, not even his disciples. He has shown example with his own life. He wants us to take a cue from what he did. A leader must lead by example.

Alexander the Great, one of the finest military leaders of all time, once made an eleven-day forced march with his troops. They were exhausted and almost dying of thirst. Some of the soldiers managed to collect water from a stream in a Helmet and took it to their leader. After a moment’s hesitation, Alexander handed the helmet back to them, its contents untouched. He wouldn’t ask his men to do anything he wouldn’t do himself. His action had an electrifying effect: with a leader like this, the soldiers could overcome weariness and thirst. The soldiers looked upon themselves as little less than immortal. James asks us to put our faith into work. Our faith is tasted in the real world, and reality comes to us often in the shape of a cross. If we are faithful followers of Christ, we are immortal. We are destined for a life of perfect joy and one that lasts forever.