

24th Sunday in ordinary Time – 2021B

That's an interesting question in today's gospel: "Who do you say that I am Have you ever tried to answer that question? Who do **you** think Jesus is?"

Down through the centuries there have been a thousand answers. Jesus in fact has been like a living Rorschach test: Everyone tends to see him as they are, as they want him, need him, to be. Every era, in short, makes Jesus over to its own image and likeness. So, in one era, Jesus is a fearsome deity like Zeus waiting to hurl lightning bolts; or he is a suffering servant in agony on a wooden crossbeam; in another era, he is a manicured man hanging from a \$22,000 gold cross from Tiffany's.

For some he is the Jewish version of Che Guevara, a revolutionary promoting violence. He is a capitalist. He is a philosopher. He is a social worker - you name it.

Our current age is no exception to the self-projection rule. For many today and in particular our youth, Jesus is our buddy, the friend who gives a thumbs-up and winks. He is sweet, non-judgmental, a live-and-let-live kind of a guy. A heck of a nice fella, but not who, in the long run, really inspires you and certainly not someone you would die for – or live for, for that matter.

A few years ago, there was a study of youth and religion which surveyed 3200 American teenagers. It found that adolescents are not hostile toward religion. The reason teenagers are not hostile to

religion? Because they have no reason to be. According to the vast majority of teenagers interviewed for this study, religion is simply not a big deal and Jesus is not a big deal, and, although an important person, he is not very strong, not very challenging, and certainly not demanding. What an easygoing Jesus! And when asked to describe this Jesus, students, just like their parents would, write on the blackboard words like, "loving, forgiving, kind, friendly, merciful, generous" Bottom line? You couldn't ask for a nicer guy.

Youth, by definition, is passionate. They want to make a difference by having a hands-on experience of feeding the poor. They are generous. They want authenticity, which is why for years a million of them on World Youth Day flocked to see a septuagenarian pope. But they have, for the most part, been served up a passionless Jesus, one full of platitudes but no prickles, creches but no crosses. You wonder: Just who is this Jesus? He's nothing like the Jesus in the gospels. And we wonder why our youth don't want to go to church.

This soft version is not a Jesus to get excited about, get passionate about. This is not the awesome Jesus of the gospels. He's not the one we find there who came to bring a sword, not peace, or who shouted at us to tear out our eye if it was accessing porn on the internet. He is not the one who told us to shun the revenge and violence so dear to the TV, movies, and video games, to turn our one cheek when the other is slapped, to offer no resistance, to feed the hungry, give drink to thirsty, clothe the naked of the world, visit the imprisoned, and forgive wicked world leaders, like Josef Stalin and

Adolf Hitler, from the bottom our hearts. Or else, no doubt about it, we're going to burn in hell. This very unbland Jesus said all this. It's right there in the gospels: Matthew 25.

In constructing our colorless Jesus, you would think we had never heard his sharp words on Sundays about the doomed, materialistic rich man and Lazarus, about the Son of Man who casts evildoers into eternal fire (Mt 13:42), the Lord who hands the unjust servant over to the torturers (Mt 18:34), and tosses the man without the wedding garment into the outer darkness (Mt 22:13). How about his unnerving parables of the Master who cuts into pieces the faithless servant? (Mt 24:51 The Greek words for 'severely punish' literally mean cut in two). Or where he throws into outer darkness the parsimonious servant (Mt 25:30)? In Luke's version it says: "But as for those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them, bring them here and slaughter them in my presence" (Lk 19:27)? How about his pointed words, "What does it profit us if we gain the whole world and lose our very souls?"

You would think we never heard Jesus telling stories about destroying nasty tenants (Mk 12:9), declaring that unbelievers will have to endure God's wrath (Jn 3:36), that he has come to set a son against his father and a daughter against her mother (Mt 10:34-35). This so-called sweet Jesus calls his opponents liars (Jn 8:55) and has a sustained role as terrible judge in the book of Revelation (1:13-14; 1:16; 19:15, 19:17-18).

Would this kind of Jesus go to the Casino de Montreal? I don't think so. Unless it were to sit in the middle of the road with a half-fed child

between his knees, midway between the casino and the squalor to be found in parts of Montreal, in silent witness, until they carried him away for disturbing the peace. The Jesus of the gospels is countercultural and brave and courageous and strong and determined—or he would never have endured his excruciating passion and death. And after his resurrection he proudly wore his scars as a sign that the kingdom of God is won with a lot of sweat, not given.

He's about a way of life. He's about the decisions we make at business, school and in the home. He's about honesty and caring and concern for others. He's about whistle-blowing and ethics. He's about chastity and fidelity. He's about truth. He's about making relationships work. He's about keeping one's word. He's about life, life here and hereafter, for those who listen to him, and not much life for those who don't.

And he's principled as well as merciful; demanding as well as forgiving, provided we repent; full of love indeed, but a tough love that is not content to look the other way but which desperately wants us to grow, to be decent, to be holy, to be saints. He will settle for nothing less. That's the Jesus of tradition, of the gospels, quite different from our rose-colored image of him. If we don't have this kind of a Jesus worth dying for, then he is not worth living for either and many of our youth, alas, have not met that Jesus.

"Who do you say that I am?" What would you say to him? How do you depict Jesus? I want us to wrestle with this question all week. When we meet with friends, discuss it. At the lunch break, discuss it. Around the table, discuss it. See if the Jesus you know excites you, challenges

you, makes you very nervous with his demands, yet at the same time makes you want to know more about him and follow him and love him. A lot rides on our answer to his question: Who do **you** say that I am?

Deacon Gerry

