

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Isaiah 50:5-9A

Psalm 116:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9

James 2:14-18

Mark 8:27-35

Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.

The Garaventa Center

The University of Portland

The late First Lady Barbara Bush used to tell a story about a party she and her husband attended during a visit to London. During the party, a woman, whom Mrs. Bush was too kind to name, turned to George Bush and cried out, "Peter!" He replied, "My name is George Bush. I'm the President of the United States." Later, in an attempt to make light of the incident, President Bush sent the woman a photograph of himself with Millie, the family dog. He signed the picture, "With kindest regards, George Bush." And added in parentheses, "I'm the one on the left." Thereafter, the incident was the basis of a running joke in the White House, as Mrs. Bush kidded her husband that he obviously wasn't as famous as he thought he was. If some minor celebrity with an inflated ego was mistaken for someone else at a gathering of London's elite, he or she might be hurt, or angered, and might even be moved to say, "Don't you realize who I am?" But someone as prominent as a President of the United States has nothing at stake in such an encounter. At least according to Mrs. Bush, her husband felt only amusement and sympathy for the woman who had publicly humiliated herself by her error.

Our Gospel today centers on a question of identity. Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" A great deal is riding on the disciples' response, but for the *disciples*, not for Jesus. Jesus knows who he is. His identity as Son of the living God does not depend on their

answer. It is the disciples, not Jesus, who are being weighed in the balance. Their situation is a bit like that of the poor woman at the party, in that their answer to Jesus' question will reflect not on him, but on them. Peter answers for them all. He blurts out, "You are the Christ," and in the other synoptic Gospels, we learn that on the basis of this answer, Jesus chooses Peter as the rock upon whom he will build his church. So it is Peter, not Jesus, who is transformed by the incident.

Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" is directed not only to the disciples, but also to each one of us. And for us, as for them, everything is riding on the answer. In our response, it is we, not the Lord, who are being weighed in the balance. And if we, like Peter, can acknowledge Jesus for whom he is, it is we, like Peter, who are transformed.

From the moment we recognize our Savior, we begin to judge the world, not by human standards, but by God's standards. Our judgment is likely to be flawed at first. Peter himself follows up his great insight with an error, and he receives a strong reprimand from Jesus as a result. But from the moment that Jesus is acknowledged as the Christ, Peter's transformation, and ours, is begun. The world will never look the same to us again. We begin to see that it is not folly, but wisdom, to take up our cross, and follow the Lord. We will walk in the presence of the Lord, in the land of the living.