

In our Gospel this morning, Jesus asked the question, “Who do you say that I am?” Over the years I have read and listened to some of the greatest minds and their take on this question or studied their personal Christian conviction and I should like to briefly share some of these with you:

H. G. Wells wrote “Christ is the most unique person of history. No man can write a history of the human race without giving first and foremost place to the penniless teacher of Nazareth.” Henrik Ibsen playwright said he is “the greatest rebel who ever lived.” Charles Lamb author, and collator of Shakespeare’s works, observed, “If all the illustrious men of history were gathered together and Shakespeare should enter their presence, they would arise to do him honour; but if Jesus Christ should come in, they would all fall down and worship him.” It was Napoleon who wrote of Christ: “I know men, and I tell you, Jesus was more than a man.” The great French painter, Eugene Delacroix, believed that “God’s inner presence, beyond a doubt, constitutes the inspiration of men of genius” (Pack, 1972, 697). The great composer, Liszt, was convinced that “the Word of God reveals itself in the creations of genius” (La Mara, 1968, 544). Corrie Ten Boom wrote: If you look at the world you will be distressed, if you look within you will be depressed. If you look at God you will be at rest.” Michelangelo saw God as the source of his vigour and great achievements: “My dear Lord, only You I call and supplicate about the vain and blind torment: You only can renew me within and without.” (Stone 1963, 245). The great Russian novelist, Tolstoy, believed that “life is life, only when it is the carrying out of God’s purpose” (Crowell, 1927, 308). Maya Angelou reflected: “It is a wonderful thing to know that there is something to know, there is something greater than I am, and that is God.” Bach concluded most of his works with a brief, “Soli Deo Gloria,” (To God alone be the glory). The scientific giant, Albert Einstein, stated that the driving force behind his scientific search was “to know how God created this world . . . I want to know His thoughts, the rest are details” (Clark, 1971, 18-19). Goethe, toward the end of his life, affirmed that his love for “the founder of Christianity” could not be taken from him. (Goethe, 1882, 208). Hegel firmly believed that “the Son takes the sin of the world upon Himself.” Kepler rested on Christ’s promise that Christians have awaiting them “faithful mansions in the house of the Father” (Beer, 1975, 356). To Schubert his Saviour was “the glorious Christ” (Schubert, 1970, 115). Shakespeare ended his life affirming his faith in the saving power of Jesus Christ (Rowe, 1985, 182). The 20th century’s greatest philosopher, Wittgenstein, expressed his faith in Christ as leading to salvation. These great minds and more over the years have convinced me too that Jesus is the Christ. In the light of these and many of the greatest minds of our world it seems to me that the Christian life begins and ends with that personal knowledge that one is found by a gracious God.

The consequence of the astonishing good news of being found is the desire to live his ways in your life. I realise that the fears of being mistaken for being too enthusiastic have made it awkward for many of us to put it this way; nevertheless, there is an undeniable personal commitment that is at the heart of Christianity. When Jesus asked Peter, “Who do you say that I am?” he was asking about his allegiance to him not about his general relative religious knowledge. When you declare Jesus to be the incarnation of God, you are declaring your own place in the universe of spiritual beliefs and practices. Without such a commitment it is all too

easy to construct your own religion that leaves you at some distance from the living God. That distance is the definition of lost. Strange as it may sound, it is possible to be lost without even knowing it until the great someone asks you “Who do you say that I am”. Again, strangely enough, one can maintain membership in religious institutions and engage in religious activities, even use religious language, “God talk,” but have no personal allegiance to any God, including the one known in Jesus. That is how we end up with mere religious observance: religion without discipleship or where nothing personal is at stake. When the chips are gone and the ship of state is sinking, it is only self that matters. May I tell you that is indeed a very small island on which to rest one’s life.

Page of 1 2 Religion is easy, following Jesus is not. That is the truth that Jesus was after when he asked Peter the most important question. It’s what he is after when he asks us to get real and follow him. That being said I stumble more often than walk, I fail more often than follow, I’m more like Peter than Paul, and I believe, despite my doubt, that the one in whom I have put my trust is faithful and will not abandon me. As Saint Paul says, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For that I am grateful. Jesus is not any easier to follow, in fact, as I get older and more comfortable and as the world continues to be wracked by war and poverty, it is more difficult to walk in his way. Then and now, Jesus does not offer an easy way, so that I might be better adjusted to this ungodly world of war, greed, violence, and deception. He calls me, as he called Peter, to let go of my own life so that I might enter into his life that counters this world, and in him find peace. “Who do you say that I am?” is the question that invites me over and over again to cling to Christ who is my only hope. So, beloved of God, let me ask you a personal question. It’s time to get real. Jesus asks “Who do you say that I am?” Amen.

Fr Robert Newton