

Zech 12:10-11

Psalm 63

Gal 3: 26-29

Lk 9: 18-24

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In today's Gospel Jesus asks not only the most critical question of his ministry, but also the most courageous: Who do people say that I am? It is critical, because the answer has implications. If he is the Messiah, then that means he must suffer, if one, then the other; there is a linkage here that cannot be cut asunder. It is courageous, because as soon as the question is asked, one opens himself/herself to the unknown. What do people actually think of me? Do you have the courage to hear the truth, to be vulnerable?

Most people do not view themselves as great sinners. Many people struggle with the sacrament of Reconciliation because they find themselves repeating the same sins over and over and when you become accustomed to your sinfulness, it really doesn't seem a big deal. At times, people say, "Father, I'm no big sinner. I haven't robbed a bank recently, not have I murdered anyone." If this were the measure of sanctity, then I think we would all do well. There is a problem here, however. When Bonnie and Clyde or Saddam or Lizzie Borden are the measures of our holiness, I doubt that anyone of us can be judged holy. Maybe we need to compare ourselves to Mother Theresa or St. Francis. At that point, maybe we are not as holy as we thought. One of the best pieces of advice I ever heard was, "If you want to know your sins, ask those you live with; they will tell you!" There is a lot of wisdom there. That takes us back to our Gospel: "Who do people say that I am?"

In the United States we are known to ourselves as the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave. But our image in the world is something other. The recent incidents in the Baghdad prison show a side to Americans that we did not think possible. When we ask the world, "Who do people say that I am?" – what response will we receive? Admittedly, it is the action of a few, but we

would be foolish to discount what happened there and not think that we as a nation are not capable of sinfulness. It is critical to ask the question; it takes courage to listen to the answer and then to do something about it. What was your response when you heard about the Baghdad incident? "They deserve it for the way they treated those four contractors." "It is much ado about nothing." "It's the commanders' fault, because they didn't receive enough training." "It's not as bad as what Saddam did." There we go again, using the wrong standard of holiness. If our reaction was anything other than revulsion, we need to examine ourselves and confront a truth.

We do ourselves a disservice if we leave this discussion on an impersonal, international level. For a moment, we need to become uncomfortable here. "Who do people say that I am?" If you lie, you are a liar. If you steal, you are a thief. If you gossip, you are a slanderer. Unpleasant words, but it is the truth, nonetheless. There is a solution, however. Become the change you wish to be. "Who do people say that I am?" If you help others, you are an angel in need. If you give of your time and talents, you are a generous person. If you forgive, you are a healer. The solution is really quite simple, it just takes courage.

The question of Jesus is our question. Ask it. As it was critical and courageous for Jesus, so it is for us. You might be surprised at the answer. If the answer is pleasing to you, do more of what is good and great. If the answer is painful, don't become angry at the other if he or she speaks the truth; just become different. In either case, become the change you wish to be.

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