

## *Jesus Embraces his Mission*

*Today's gospel reading is the central turning point of the Gospel of Mark. Thus far in the story Jesus has appeared as a healer and exorcist, a wonder-worker, displaying an "authority" (exousía) that throws the Pharisees, upholders of a conventional orthodoxy, into disarray. The meaning of his activities is far from clear and produces a host of conflicting interpretations. Now Jesus turns to his disciples, and to us, the readers of the Gospel, with the question: "Who do you say that I am?"*

*In Mark, the humanity of Jesus is so strongly emphasized that it would not be unreasonable to read this as a genuine question on Jesus's part, not just a catechist's prompt. Jesus perhaps wants to learn how people see him and define him. Perhaps he also wants to clarify his own identity and is asking the disciples' help in defining his role. When John the Baptist asked, "are you he who is to come or should we look for another" (Mt 11:3; Lk 7:19), Jesus did not answer directly, but pointed to the signs of healing he had worked. These can be interpreted as messianic signs, but Jesus himself in his humanity may have been surprised by them and may have come to discern his own messianic vocation, and all that it entailed, only by degrees.*

*There is a fine moment in Martin Scorsese's controversial film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, in which Jesus points to one of the Servant songs in Isaiah foretelling that the Messiah must be a man of sorrows, as if he himself had painfully learned about the necessity of the Cross. One can imagine Jesus making his own the words of these passages, as in today's first Reading: "The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting."*

*Peter's perception that the authority of Jesus can only be that of the expected Messiah earns him a blessing in Matthew's version of this story, and also a title: "You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church" (Mt 16:18). Matthew and Luke project a vision of the splendor of the Church that we do not find in Mark. In Mark's story the dramatic revelation of Jesus's identity is quickly surpassed by the command of secrecy, followed by the first of the three passion predictions, and the rebuke to Peter for "setting his mind not on divine things but on human things." In his resistance to the message of self-denial and the Cross Peter speaks on behalf of all of us. Jesus is not the kind of Messiah that any of us would have chosen. But*

*God chose a weak and suffering man to be the savior of weak and suffering humanity.*

*The place where this dialogue takes place is one of the many towns throughout the Roman world with the name Caesarea, referring to the Emperor. Emperors, to judge from Robert Graves' classic work, *I, Claudius*, were often bloated, ruthless egoists, indulging every obscene passion—that seems true at least of Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero. The sovereignty of ego might flatter our tastes at first, but it ends in horror. A Messiah is also a King, successor of David. But Christ as King, and the Kingdom of God, belong to a different reality from the earthly power and authority supremely embodied in the Roman emperor.*

*For the rest of the Gospel, Jesus is oriented to Jerusalem and his journey is marked by two further passion predictions. His Messiahhood remains hidden. Only at 14:62, in response to the direct question of the high priest—"Are you the Messiah?"—, does Jesus at last declare his identity openly: "I am, and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven."*

*This theme of the "Messianic secret" has fascinated theological and literary students of Mark's Gospel. Perhaps it suggests that the title of "Messiah" does not fully suit the singular event of Jesus, and that indeed any title will not quite fit. Jesus is more question than answer, a divine question opened up at the heart of human history. Paraphrasing St Paul, we might say, "The questions of God are more saving than the answers of men." No matter how securely we define the nature of Christ, in biblical study and in doctrinal formulations, he will always remain one who questions us. Who do we say that he is? He is the crucified and risen one, who will come in glory. But where do we find him today? In fact, Christ is crucified all around us, and the power of his resurrection is at work everywhere as well. We miss seeing this when we cling to our selfish security, "for whoever would save his life will lose it."*