

*“But who do you say that I am?”* Not everyone is able to answer this question. Jesus does not ask it of the scribes and Pharisees, nor of the people in the streets. This question is reserved for His disciples, for those who follow Him and hear His voice.

It is impossible for the people of the world to get this question right. They do not know who Jesus is. *“Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”*

It’s no different in our day. No one is going to accidentally stumble upon the correct answer. The answer is not in our heads somewhere. It does not come by way of *“flesh and blood,”* says Jesus. It can only be revealed by the *“Father who is in heaven.”*

Peter knows the answer, not because he is smarter than everyone else, but because God reveals it to him. How? Through the consistent teaching of Jesus. Those who are not taught by Jesus cannot know who He is, although they do have their opinions.

Today, also, it would be rare indeed to find someone who has not heard of Jesus, and who does not have an opinion of who He is. And yet, Jesus’ question is not for them, not now anyway.

*“But who do you say that I am?”* Jesus puts not just to Simon Peter, but to all twelve of His disciples. Peter is the only one to speak, but he speaks not just for himself, but for them all. In fact, Peter speaks also for us. His answer is the Church’s response to Jesus’ question. Every disciple must answer individually for himself and herself, yet Jesus’ disciples are not mere individuals. His Church is a community. It is a body of believers, Jesus’ body, and He is the Head.

Can the body not know its own head? Impossible. Every Christian knows who Jesus is, that He is *“the Christ, the Son of the living God”* – from the tiniest baptized infant to the oldest and most senile church member all drawn up in his bed in a nursing home.

There are not a thousand answers to Jesus’ question. Not a hundred, not a dozen, not even two. There is only one, the answer Peter gives, for this answer is given by God Himself.

It is out of the mouths of those in the world that many different answers are given. But the Church is Jesus’ body, and a body has only one mouth. The Church speaks with one voice, one confession: *“Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.”*

The Church, therefore, is blessed. *“Blessed are you, Simon,”* says Jesus, for the answer he gives. Upon this answer, this response, this confession of Christ, the Christ who suffers and dies on the cross, and who is raised to life, Jesus will build His Church, and the very *“gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”*

Do you hear this? Jesus’ body has nothing to fear. All the hordes of demons streaming out from the gates of hell cannot prevail against Jesus’ Church. They cannot gain the victory. All the powers of hell itself cannot defeat Jesus’ body, His Church.

But can they defeat me? Have you ever asked yourself this question? You are weak, as am I. We are not stronger than the forces of hell. We prove this, at least I do, by giving in to temptation again and again. The gates of hell are not able to defeat Jesus' Church, but it sure seems like they are able to defeat me time and again.

Look again at Peter. He gives the correct answer to Jesus' question. He is "*blessed*," says Jesus. He is undefeatable against the gates of hell. Yet there were two times that we know of, when Peter was very much defeatable. One of these was two Sundays ago when he got down out of the boat to walk on the water toward Jesus. The other time was when he denied his Lord, "*the Christ, the Son of the living God*," three times. The first time Peter doubted, and Jesus called him "*little faith*." The second time Peter had no faith at all.

You know why Peter was so defeatable these two times? Because these are the two times he separates himself from the other disciples. He leaves the eleven in the boat and comes by himself to Jesus on the water, and he sinks beneath the waves. On the night Jesus is betrayed, Peter separates himself again from the disciples. "*Even if they all fall away (from You, Jesus,) I will never fall away!*" But he does. He falls, he denies Jesus, and again he sinks, this time into the depths of darkness.

Peter is very defeatable by the powers of hell, and not at all blessed, when he leaves the safety of the Church, Jesus' body – when he separates himself from the group of disciples.

Jesus promises that the gates of hell cannot ever prevail against His Church. But be warned. If you, or if I, like Peter, willfully go off on our own, leaving the body of believers behind, that promise no longer applies to us. Jesus' Church cannot be defeated. But we will be defeated if we sinfully neglect the gathering of the Church around the Christ she confesses.

We must repent, therefore, of the sinful desire that dwells in us to be less than faithful in the hearing of Jesus' words and receiving of His Sacrament. We need to repent of the sinful desire in us to separate ourselves from the body of Christ and be our own body.

And repenting, let us turn our eyes again to Peter. And let us rejoice that, in spite of his separating himself from the disciples, Jesus brought him back. Jesus returned him to the body, His body. He restored Peter and He forgave him.

Why did Jesus do this for Peter? Because Jesus is "*the Christ, the Son of the living God*." And as the Christ, the Savior of sinners who gave Himself up on the cross for all, He delights in returning and restoring those who fall away. And as the Son of the living God, He delights in giving life, His life, to those who become dead in the depths of their sins.

This is the same Jesus you confess Sunday after Sunday. However far away you have fallen, He is here now restoring you, returning you to His body, to your baptism into His death and resurrection. However greatly you have sinned, He right here and now forgives you. Yes, you. Be assured that your sins are forgiven. And with your sins thus forgiven, the gates of hell have no power over you. They cannot defeat you, for you are the body of Christ. Amen.