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Jesus is seated on a throne with his disciples at his side in this fresco seen during the unveiling of two newly restored burial chambers in the Christian catacombs of St. Domitilla in Rome May 30. The Catacombs of St. Domitilla are believed to be the world's oldest Christian cemetery. (CNS/Carol Glatz)



by Mary M. McGlone

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## Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

[Sept. 16, 2018](#)

Isaiah 50:5-9a

Psalms 116

James 2:14-18

Mark 8:27-35

"Who do you say that I am?" That's the final, blunt question that Jesus puts to the disciples in today's Gospel. No more hiding behind popular speculation; they had to answer for themselves. Worst of all, their answer could not be just an opinion. What they said now would profess their level of commitment. Their answer would explain just how far they would be willing to go with him.

How do we explain to people who Jesus is? We might tell children, "Jesus is the Son of God." That is probably the best start we can make, but it is rather incomplete. It is akin to explaining who a relative is by saying, "Cousin Margaret is the daughter of Uncle Martin." But so what? What is special about Uncle Martin or his daughter? The lights go on when someone explains that Uncle Martin sold the farm so he could send Margaret from Ireland to work and earn enough to save the rest of us from famine.

Now suppose you hear that Uncle Martin inherited a couple more farms and wants to adopt you. That sounds promising. But you would be wise to consider the idea that he might be willing to sell them and then send you to work for the rest of the family. How might that change the situation?

Why would you want to join Uncle Martin's nuclear family? Marty has become known for a particular, if not peculiar, sort of behavior. He is ready to adopt anybody who is willing to participate fully in family life, but his value system is a real spoiler for

anyone who has individual get-rich plans. According to Martin, wealth is fine, but he wants it for everybody, not just himself or even just his family. Being related to him has consequences.



Mark Bartholomew

Uncle Martin's story reflects today's Gospel challenge. Jesus asked his disciples who they believed him to be. "The Messiah," said Peter. But what did that imply? Peter and the rest were faithful to Jesus according to their understanding of the Messiah. They were like someone that our landlord uncle offered to adopt. Only after getting excited about it, did the adoptee seriously consider Martin's plans for sharing the wealth. When Jesus explained the way he understood being Messiah, Peter was quick to try to straighten him out. Like the would-be nephew who tells Uncle Martin, "You're a wealthy landowner! If you sell this farm, you'll be nobody. (And me, too!)" Peter knows that if his Messiah is going to suffer, so will his followers.

Jesus answered Peter with the same words he used to call the sons of Zebedee: "Follow me" (translated now as, "Get behind me"). The implication was clear: If Peter and the rest believed that Jesus was the Messiah, then they had to trust Jesus to know how a Messiah should act. Jesus called disciples to introduce them to his way of living and to advance the venture he called the reign of God. Their story demonstrates that it takes a long time to grow into sharing Jesus' priorities, but more important than their shortcomings is the fact that they stayed with him — and he with them.

Staying with Jesus, in spite of his warning that he and they would suffer, was what constituted that group as disciples. Having heard about the cost, they continued to listen to him.

What about today? How do we answer the question of who Jesus is? We can answer with our creed, but it is a pretty intellectual statement. The closest we get to an answer are statements: "For us ... and for our salvation, he came down from heaven. ... For our sake he was crucified."

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If we want to answer the question with heart and soul as well as mind, we need to encounter Christ, walk with him and talk with him. In his latest apostolic exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Pope Francis asks, "Are there moments when you place yourself quietly in the Lord's presence, when you calmly spend time with him, when you bask in his gaze? Do you let his fire inflame your heart?"

As Catholics, our poor tradition of reading Scripture has left many unaware that the church "has always venerated the Scriptures as she venerates the Lord's Body" (Catechism of the Catholic Church). In light of that, Francis reminds us that we can encounter Christ through prayerful reading of the Bible in which we allow God's word "to enlighten and renew us."

When we spend time encountering Christ and allow him to enlighten and renew us, our way of living will be our final answer to who we say he is.

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**Editor's note:** This Sunday scripture commentary appears in full in NCR's sister publication [Celebration](#), a worship and homiletic resource. Sign up to receive [weekly Scripture for Life emails](#).

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