

ZE06091501 - 2006-09-15

Permalink: <http://www.zenit.org/article-16985?l=english>

Father Cantalamessa Asks: Who Is Jesus for You?

Pontifical Household Preacher on This Sunday's Gospel

ROME, SEPT. 15, 2006 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of a commentary by Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher to the Pontifical Household, on the liturgical readings for this Sunday's liturgical readings.

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Who Do You Say That I Am?

Isaiah 50:5-9a; James 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-35

The three synoptic Gospels refer to the episode of Jesus when, in Caesarea Philippi he asked his apostles what people thought of him. The common fact in the three Gospels is Peter's response: "You are the Christ."

Matthew adds: "the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16) which could, however, be a manifestation due to the faith of the Church after Easter.

Soon the title "Christ" became Jesus' second name. It is mentioned more than 500 times in the New Testament, almost always in the composite form "Jesus Christ" or "Our Lord Jesus Christ."

However, it was not so in the beginning. Between Jesus and Christ a verb was understood: "Jesus is the Christ." To say "Christ" was not to call Jesus by his name, but to make an affirmation about him.

Christ, we know, is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Mashiah, or Messiah, and both mean "anointed." The term derives from the fact that in the Old Testament kings, prophets and priests, at the moment of their election, were consecrated through an anointing with perfumed oil.

But increasingly in the Bible there clearly is talk of a special anointed or consecrated one who will come in the end times to fulfill God's promises of salvation to his people. It is the so-called biblical messianism, which takes on different hues according to how the Messiah is seen as a future king (royal messianism) or as Daniel's son of man (apocalyptic messianism).

The whole primitive tradition of the Church is unanimous in proclaiming that Jesus of Nazareth is the awaited Messiah. He himself, according to Mark, will proclaim himself such before the Sanhedrin. To the question of the High Priest: "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" He replies: "I am" (Mark 14:61 ff.).

So much more disconcerting, therefore, is the continuation of Jesus' dialogue with the disciples in Caesarea Philippi: "And he commanded them energetically not to speak about him to any one."

However, the motive is clear. Jesus accepts being identified with the awaited Messiah, but not with the idea

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that Judaism had made for itself of the Messiah. In the prevailing opinion, the Messiah was seen as a political and military leader who would liberate Israel from pagan dominion and establish the kingdom of God on earth by force.

Jesus had to profoundly correct this idea, shared by his own apostles, before allowing them to talk of him as the Messiah. To this end is oriented the discourse that follows immediately: "And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things."

The harsh word addressed to Peter, which seeks to dissuade him from such thoughts: "Get behind me, Satan!" is identical with that addressed to the tempter of the desert.

In both cases, in fact, it is about the same attempt to deflect him from the path that the Father has indicated to him -- that of the suffering servant of Yahweh -- to another which is "according to men, not according to God."

Salvation will come from the sacrifice of himself, from "giving his life in ransom for many," not from the elimination of the enemy. In this way, from a temporal salvation one passes to an eternal salvation, from a particular salvation -- destined for only one people -- one passes to a universal salvation.

Regrettably we must state that Peter's error has been repeated in history. Also certain men of the Church, and even Successors of Peter, have behaved at certain times as if the Kingdom of God was of this world and should be affirmed with the victory (if necessary also with arms) over enemies, instead of doing so with suffering and martyrdom.

All the words of the Gospel are timely, but the dialogue of Caesarea Philippi is so in an altogether special way. The situation has not changed. Also today, people have very diverse opinions on Jesus: a prophet, a great teacher, a great personality. It has become fashionable to present Jesus in shows and novels, in customs and in the strangest messages. The "Da Vinci Code" is only the latest in a long series.

In the Gospel, Jesus does not seem to be surprised by people's opinions, nor does he take time to deny them. He only poses a question to his disciples, and he does so also today: "For you, who am I for you?"

A leap must be taken that does not come from the flesh or from blood, but is a gift of God which must be accepted through the docility of an interior light from which faith is born. Every day there are men and women who take this leap.

Sometimes it is famous people -- actors, actresses, men of culture -- and then they make news. But infinitely more numerous are the unknown believers. At times nonbelievers interpret these conversions as weakness, sentimental crises or a search for popularity, and it might be that in some cases it is so. But it would be a lack of respect of the conscience of the rest to cast discredit on every story of conversion.

One thing is certain: Those who have taken this leap will not go back for anything in the world, and more than that, they are surprised to have been able to live for so long without the light and strength that comes from faith in Christ.

Like St. Hillary of Poitiers, who converted when he was an adult, they are willing to exclaim: "Before knowing you, I did not exist."

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