

Isn't it interesting that who we are depends on what other people make of us? Surely, we say to ourselves, who I am depends on me; it's my business – something to be worked out between me and myself, or for those of a religious mind-set, between me and God. But can it ever be a solitary quest? I have in mind here, both today's gospel passage, *Who do people say that I am?*, and the insistence in the letter of James, that faith without works is dead, and I wonder whether Thomas Merton's life doesn't also illustrate this tension. He sets out to find himself and dreams of times of doing this alone

*There is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend; to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him, I will find myself; and if I find my true self, I will find Him.*

And, at least initially, he only allows God to help him in this quest;

*Nor can all the men and all the created things in the universe help (me) in this work. The only One who can teach me to find God is God, himself, Alone.*

(Seeds of Contemplation p13)

Now this, to me, seems a rather discarnate way of going about it and later, in Merton, we see the tremendous joy he takes in discovering himself, and God one might add, through his contact with other people, to the point, indeed, where this endangers his solitary vocation or quest. Now, it's also interesting that Jesus asks his question, *Who do people say I am?* after an intense period of mission, of healing various people and feeding the hungry. You've seen my works and you've heard what I've to say, especially in conflict with the Scribes and Pharisees, now what do other people make of me? They think of him in terms of people who have gone before: John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets but Peter is prompted, or suddenly realises, that Jesus has a character that is entirely new or unique: *You are the Christ*, he says, long expected but not seen before, the anointed one or Messiah.

So what I would like to suggest is that, whatever Jesus really thought of himself, whether indeed, Peter's statement isn't also a revelation to Jesus himself, we know that whoever he is has had a great deal to do with how he has acted towards others and what they then have made of him. This is faith and works and identity as one. But Jesus knows that this definition of him as Messiah is also incomplete – still based on past expectations of what a Messiah should be: victorious, triumphant, re-establishing Israel as an earthly power and religious force. So Peter's insight into his uniqueness is still only partial and says something about the incompleteness of identity for all of us until it's lived out to the point of death. Jesus then goes on to make this clear in his prediction of his future suffering, death and resurrection in which his true uniqueness lies. His full identity depends on giving his life fully for others: this, of course, is the difficult bit for us, too, where we, in a sense, surrender our meaning to others. In this sense, our journey to God is never alone; who we are is always closely tied to who we are *for others*. This is love of God and love of neighbour as two sides of the same coin. You can't have one without the other. And, indeed, the full coin, the complete coin, is not only love of God and love of neighbour but love of self in the sense of knowing oneself as acceptable to God and others, after all.

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