

Most of the time, Jesus acted like someone who couldn't care less about his reputation. Denouncing the whole population as a wicked and sinful generation, heaping scorn on people they looked up to, choosing unpopular people for his friends, "eating and drinking," that is, partying too hard, with those friends and, for good measure, saying the end of the world was coming... these are not the choices of a man seeking public approval. Ironically, his lack of self-absorption is yet another reason for us to hold Jesus in esteem. But perhaps more surprising is that despite all he had done that could tarnish his image, the people the disciples have been talking with have some rather favorable answers.

John the Baptist had been leading a spiritual renewal movement with anti-establishment overtones, and had gotten himself killed by that establishment. He made enough of a reputation for himself that he had become identified with the popular ancient heroic prophet Elijah, whom God had taken directly into heaven, and who was expected to return to Earth. Apparently there was a rumor circulating that John was Elijah, or at least enough like him that he could have returned to life after being executed. Jesus's movement and personality were similar enough to John's — and, therefore, to Elijah's — that it's easy to see how these impressions could take hold.

Jeremiah is a more intriguing choice. If we think of him at all, we tend to think of him as a harsh harbinger of certain doom. A real wet blanket. But all of that was to set the stage for the wonderful things God would do in the midst of all that despair. Jeremiah assured the people that despite all their suffering, God was saying, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you." And that was only to set the stage for something even greater. Jeremiah said, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more" (31:31, 33b-34). And now, in Jesus, this prophecy was being fulfilled.

As wonderful as that is to contemplate, the story does not end there. In asking his disciples who other people thought he was, Jesus was merely setting the stage for a more important question. If the disciples had been involved in conversations about who Jesus is, they must have been speaking, as well as listening. And what were they saying? Peter answers, apparently on behalf of all of them. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Bingo.

What people say about Jesus is important. We know from personal experience that there is power in saying things about people. Our own statements can build or break reputations and fortunes. Like most clergy, I know this firsthand. Over the years, different people have told me what my politics are, what my motivations are, what I'm

feeling, what words and actions I already explained *really* meant, and that I am plotting all sorts of things. If only I had the energy! And the things people say about me behind my back — and it always gets back to me — are even more entertaining. But that all comes with the territory, and I mention it merely for illustrative purposes, not as the point of the sermon.

If what people are saying about us is so important, what people say about Jesus is even more so. Because ultimately the most important relationship anyone has is the one they have with Jesus. And in every age, people have done a lot of damage to that relationship with lies, suggestions, and half-truths. Portraying Jesus as a bad guy or remaking him in our own image has proven more damaging to Christianity than any persecution the Romans ever devised. Therefore, in every age, followers of Jesus are responsible for sharing the truth about who he is. When we get that right, like Peter did, we become part of God's plan. Talk can be cheap, but spoken words are important, more important than we usually realize. God created the universe by speaking, and when God calls us each by name, God says definitively who we are, no matter what anyone might say about us. We are good stones whom God can use, constructively, continuing to build up the Church.

Like Peter, we don't have to be perfect in order to give God a right answer. While God knows our flaws perfectly well, God still loves us, deeply and passionately. So God forgives us and reaches out to us, for our benefit and for God's own purposes, beginning with our baptism. Holy Baptism is the expression of God's unconditional and passionate love for us individually, and our initiation into God's church, where we respond to God's love corporately. Baptism is the action, the digging and hewing, that makes possible our participation in God's great ongoing construction project. The Tower of Babel was humanity's attempt to control what our relationship with God would be, and of course it was doomed to fail. But God's work is sound. The forces of death and hell cannot shake it, let alone the forces of public opinion.

God's everlasting love and faithfulness prevail over all things, eternally. Maybe that's why Jesus partied so hard with sinners. He knew who they were, but he also knew what they would become, by God's grace. We too are forgiven and redeemed sinners, and Jesus includes us in his celebration, no matter what anyone else says or thinks, so we have nothing to fear, and everything to celebrate.