

**Reflection on the Gospel-12th Sunday in Ordinary Time C
(Luke 9:18-24)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The mention of prayer in Luke is always a signal that something momentous is about to happen. Today's gospel opens with the puzzling assertion that Jesus is praying "alone" although his disciples are with him. It is as if his conversation with them is part of Jesus' solitary prayer. This gives us an insight into the prayer of Jesus: his prayer and his life mission are intimately connected. It is important for him and for his mission that his disciples come to recognise who he is. He puts two questions to them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" and "Who do you say that I am?" The crowds see him as John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets "arisen". We can hear the disciples all joining in this part of the conversation, sharing what they have heard. Their answers echo an earlier passage in this same chapter of Luke where Herod Antipas is said to be puzzled by such descriptions of Jesus and asks "Who is this about whom I hear such things?" (Luke 9:7-9).

Since Herod put this question, Jesus has pursued his ministry of teaching and healing and responding to the hunger of the crowds. Jesus himself now raises the question of his identity. We can sense the silence of the disciples when they are faced with the second question, "Who do you say that I am?" It is Peter alone who answers this time. For him and for the other disciples, Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed of God. Jesus instructs them to keep this to themselves. The disciples have much to learn before they can truly understand what they profess.

Within first-century Judaism, many expected a royal militaristic figure who would drive out the occupiers and restore Israel's status as an independent nation. Even as Peter identifies Jesus as the "Messiah of God", it is unlikely that his notion of messiah or Christ leaves room for a suffering Messiah. Has Jesus in his prayer been pondering the way of suffering he is to endure if his work as the Messiah of God is to be completed? He is to undergo "great suffering", he will be rejected by the religious authorities, he will be put to death and God will raise him up. This description meets none of the popular expectations of God's Messiah.

In case the disciples miss the implications of this, Jesus makes it clear that suffering is also the lot of those who want to "follow" him. Discipleship, now as then, has nothing to do with protecting one's own interests, with "saving one's life". It has everything to do with hearing and responding to the distress of the human poor and the distress of the earth itself.