“Who do people say that I am,” Jesus asked his disciples. The answers were easy to give, since repeating what others say is simply a matter of pushing “play” on the recorder. A parrot can do that. But then Jesus ratcheted up the challenge and asked them the crucial question of faith, “But who do you say that I am?”

I wonder if there was an awkward silence, as the disciples looked down at their shoes, or looked around at each other to see who would risk speaking up first? Jesus was flushing them out of their safety, like a bird dog stirring quail to flight. What an important question it was! It was a pop quiz that the disciples were not expecting, and one they surely did not want to fail.

“You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God,” blurs Simon Peter. Can’t you see his hand was waving in the air like a first-grader trying to please the teacher, straining to
give the right answer before anyone else in the class can. Or maybe Peter almost whispered his answer, unsure and tentative. We don’t know. But we do know that Jesus blessed Peter for his answer, assuring him that there was more truth than he could yet know, and more wisdom than he could have drummed up out of his own head. Then Jesus surprised the disciples with the strange command to keep this answer, this powerful truth of Jesus identity, a secret. If Peter got it right, why couldn’t they begin telling everyone, shouting it from the mountaintops? You would have expected Jesus to elevate Peter to the head of the class, and then form a plan for the disciples to begin spreading their confession. Instead Jesus finished the class session with the enigmatic and strict command, “Tell no one that I am the Christ.” Why?

**One reason for telling them not to spread the announcement that Jesus was the Christ, or Messiah, was because the populace held a misguided understanding of what those words meant.** The timing was wrong for a public
announcement that Jesus was the Christ. The popular understanding of those words would have inspired nationalistic hopes that Jesus had come to free Israel from Roman occupation, to usher in a new day of Israeli independence, a return to the “good old days” of King David and King Solomon. Jesus knew there was much more work to be done, and teaching to give, and a cross upon which to die, before the world could begin to adjust their expectation and definition of what kind of Messiah he came to be.

In the previous few days Jesus had fed the multitude, healed many sick people; His resultant popularity swelled to unmanageable size and expectation quickly. That was the reason Jesus had led his disciples to this quiet and private retreat in the first place, to escape the crowds, and allow the temporary and misguided euphoria to die down. If Jesus had really come to inspire and gather an army against Rome, he would have done just the opposite. He had the crowd just where a politician or general would want them, frothing at the bit, he had momentum and
soaring numbers in the popular opinion polls. He deliberately let it all slip away… why? Jesus did not come to free Israel alone, but all nations. He did not come to establish a kingdom on earth, but an eternal kingdom that would begin by turning earthly powers and ideas upside down, inviting God’s Kingdom to “come on earth, as it is in heaven.”

But again, it wasn’t time. The world was not ready to hear the redefinition of what the title, Christ, meant.

But the other reason Jesus told the disciples to keep silent was that they were not yet ready to bear the burden, or face the consequences, of their confession. They needed more time to grow in their understanding, to mature into their confession, before attempting to share it with others.

Isn’t this the way it is with all of us too? How many times do we say the right words, offer the right counsel, make the right
vows, but have very little idea what those words will mean for us? How many fresh recruits for the National Guard fully understand the sacrifice that might be required of them as they pledge their loyalty and obedience? Were there some who simply thought this would be only a weekend per month of training? Some extra cash to pay bills, or a way for Uncle Sam to provide for some college education? Did they imagine an eighteen month tour of dangerous duty overseas? And how many brides and grooms who pledge to love each other “in sickness and health, poverty and wealth, until death do us part” have any idea what that vow will mean? Do they really understand what it is like to love a spouse through a long and debilitating illness, or through a financial collapse, or simply through the years as time and gravity carves wrinkles and frailty in their youthful bodies? How can they understand all that their words will mean on the day of their wedding? At the moment they recite those words many couples are just trying not to faint.
It is the same way with the words of faith. When we first learn the great creeds of the Church, or sing the great hymns of the saints… we have little understanding of the depth and mystery of those words. That is fine. We put these great words on, like a child dressing up in parent’s clothing, in the hope that one day we will grow into them ourselves. And God smiles approvingly, knowing that if we pay attention to life, we will grow into our words of confession and faith. It may be suffering that carves patience into our understanding, or our failures along the way that carves humility—the point is, we grow into our words gradually across the span of our lives. Those who have faced starvation understand how good it is to have food in a different way than the well-filled. Even so, perhaps only the guilty can know how amazing it is to be forgiven. And only those who have wrestled with God, and with the great questions of life and faith, can know the depth of mystery and confidence that comes from a tested faith. As the patriarch Jacob would attest after his bout in the wrestling
ring with God, the blessing of what you learn from those times is worth the limp.

So Saint Peter got the question right, but he needed time to grow into it before he was ready to share it with others. He did not yet understand, or approve, of a Messiah that suffers, and who calls his followers to bear a cross too. He did not yet understand that even death does not get the last word, or the last laugh, over those who give up their lives in service to Christ. He did not yet understand how fickle his own faith was, and how easily he could deny knowing the Lord when pressed by a curious little girl around a charcoal fire. He did not know yet—but he would soon. And then, on the far side of his failure, on the far side of Calvary, after the resurrection of Jesus, Peter would be ready, having grown into his confession. So can we….

So can we!