

Sermon 12th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16), Yr. A @ St Johns – 23/8/20
“Jesus, Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:13-20)
- Pastor André Meyer

Pray: Heavenly Father, by your Spirit open our hearts to your powerful word today, Amen.

At times it seems easy to confess Jesus is Lord and Saviour here in worship. We find it much harder to confess our faith when people openly oppose what we believe. COVID-19 has made it hard for the Church in the eastern states to gather together, and the faithful have been tested by isolation and the anxious times they are facing. There are times too when we may find it hard to remain faithful to our Lord, particularly when it gets tough, or when the road gets dark and we get weary. It's harder to confess that we believe in Jesus and His saving hand when we face pain or sickness, or the threat of it, or when financial difficulties overwhelm us, or relationships fall apart. ...When do you find it hard to confess Jesus as Lord?

Today we hear that Jesus and His disciples came to the region of Caesarea Philippi and Jesus asked them, “*Who do you say that I am?*” (Matt. 16:15). It's a question that every person will one day need to answer. In Matthew, it's important to know that the disciples are representative of the Church; the early Christians, *and* the whole people of God: *you and me*. They have been with Jesus since He called them by name to follow Him over two years ago. They are His closest companions, and although He is their respected Teacher and Master, He is also their friend. They've been part of His travelling ministry, bearing witness to His miracles wherever they have gone. They've seen His power to heal; they've marvelled at His power over nature and the elements and how He saved them from the storm. They have seen multitudes fed, not once, *but twice!* They've learned many things as He taught in parables and with great wisdom and authority. They have seen His amazing capacity for mercy towards all in need. And along the way, they have heard what many think and believe about Him. Some have confessed great faith in Him, like the Canaanite woman (15:21-28), and now, it's their turn.

Let us focus firstly on *where* this scene takes place. The region of Caesarea Philippi was a largely pagan (Gentile) territory around 40km north of the Sea of Galilee at the foot of Mt Hermon. In Jesus' day Caesarea Philippi (distinct from Caesarea on the coast) was a Roman city rebuilt and named by Herod the Great's son, Philip. Nearby the city is a cave where an ancient pagan shrine existed (perhaps earlier to Baal). Here, from the cave, a natural spring comes out of the ground. It is one of the sources of the River Jordan. Years before when the Greeks claimed this place they dedicated the shrine at the spring to their god of nature, “*Pan,*” and called the area ‘Paneas’ (today, Banias). In Greek mythology, Pan has a human face and torso, with the hindquarters, legs and horns of a goat and plays a pan flute. He's the god of nature, of the wild, and of mountains, shepherds and flocks. He had great strength and could run for long periods of time. They believed he could transform

objects into different forms and could teleport himself from Earth to Mount Olympus, the dwelling place of the gods, and back. Now, this doesn't seem important until we realise Jesus' Transfiguration for Matthew happens on Mt Hermon six days later than our text (17:1-13). The cave of this natural spring dedicated to Pan, was considered to be a gateway to the underworld from which the waters came. Years later, Herod the Great built a temple of white marble over the shrine to honour Emperor Augustus who gave him the province (20 BC). So then, this was an area dominated by Gentiles, where idols were worshipped, where there was a gateway to the underworld and death, where a pagan god was venerated... In spiritual terms, it was about as far away from Jerusalem, the Temple *and* God's holiness for a Jew as it gets!

So, when Jesus asks His question of the disciples in this strongly pagan area, there is clearly something spiritually powerful going on – in fact, something very important for us to note as the Church. *Here, in this place*, Peter, on behalf of the disciples, speaks up and makes a very simple but great confession of faith declaring *who* Jesus is and *why* He has been sent by the Father into the world. In the place where people worshipped and served idols and the god of nature and *before* the gate of the underworld and the dead, Peter, the disciples, *and* the Church, confess and proclaim confidently of Jesus: *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!"* (v.16) ...Can you 'connect the dots' and see what's going on? ...It's a foretaste of the victory Jesus will proclaim by His death and resurrection.

Friends, we know it's easy to confess Jesus as our Saviour here in worship, but it's much harder to do it outside the church's walls, isn't it? What if we went and confessed our faith in the streets of Northbridge, or in front of a nightclub or strip joint? What if we did it in front of a Mormon, Buddhist, or an Islamic temple? What if we confessed Jesus as Lord to people in our workplace, at University or school, or, our family? Even in our world today, there are many places of spiritual darkness where people honour or serve the things of this world, or idols or things that are 'dead.' There are places, *even* in our own lives where the Good News of Christ and His victory over sin, need to be powerfully proclaimed. And, wherever the Gospel is proclaimed in love, there is Christ and His presence and power to save.

How? For Jesus is not just *another* important (but dead) prophet sent from God. Jesus is not merely a great moral teacher or simply a 'good man.' Nor is He many of the other 'beliefs' out there of *who* Jesus is. No, Peter answers for the Church, for the people of God: *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!"* It means that *nothing* and *no one* can stand in Jesus' way of accomplishing the Father's will on earth. Little did Peter realise the Father's plan of salvation would be accomplished through His Son's death on a Roman cross. Delighted though at Peter's faith, Jesus responds, *"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven"* (v.17). In other words, though the

faithful share the Word, God's Spirit is the One who creates faith and life through the Gospel.

Jesus continues, "*And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...*" (v.18). Jesus uses a clear play on words here: "*You are Peter (Petros = pebble or stone) and on this 'Petra' (solid rock/bedrock) I will build my church...*". But, what exactly is this 'rock' Jesus mentions? Is it Peter's confession, or Peter himself as an apostle? Well, our protestant tradition takes the more likely course, that it is Peter's confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ. *This* is the 'rock' on which the Church is to be built. Why? For the emphasis is not on Peter as a man, but on Jesus and what He has done, and will do. Jesus declares that this has not been revealed to Peter "*by flesh and blood,*" or then, by his own reasoning, but, "*by my Father in heaven.*" The disciples are convinced that Jesus truly *is* the Christ, the Son of God, and know that it is not by their own understanding or effort that they have come to this conclusion.

Jesus then declares, "*...and the gates of Hades [Hell] will not overcome it*" (v.18). The word 'gate' Jesus uses refers to a larger impressive gate of a city, temple, or prison. Gates were an important part of fortifications and gave defenders a sense of security and strength. 'Hades' of course, is the underworld, the place of the dead. The 'gates of Hades' were regarded as particularly strong as they kept out the dead from the world of the living. Speaking metaphorically, Jesus is saying that the gates of Hades are not strong enough to triumph *against* the Church, God's redeemed. In other words, in some way, the Church will never be overcome by death! And we know, that not even death could hold Jesus captive for long as He rose from the dead. Neither will death, or all the powers of evil, ever prevail over God's people. Why? For nothing in this world can overthrow Christ!

In an area of death, of pagan worship, idolatry and a devilish underworld... in the darkest place that seems totally against God and everything life-giving and holy, shines the light of Jesus the Christ, the King of kings and Lord of Lords, in the faith-filled confession of the saints. Jesus stands victorious over all. And, wherever we confess Him as Lord, *there* He is, present among God's people despite the darkness that threatens or surrounds. And, *in Him* there is life and hope to be found.

Just as Peter proclaimed the truth of Jesus, surround by spiritual darkness, so too may we confess our faith in Jesus and His love for the world. This is what the three great Christian Creeds are all about – proclaiming *who* God is and *what* God has done *for us*. In these simple summaries of faith, we proclaim that God: Father, Son and Spirit, has sought us out and restored our broken and sinful relationship by grace. We proclaim this truth into a world of darkness, sin, opposition and death. And as we sing our praises of who God is and what He has done, God's victory in Christ is powerfully declared into the earthly, heavenly and spiritual realms. The

same is true not only as we speak the Good News, but as we *live it out* faithfully in our lives, serving God and our neighbour in love. How? By pointing people to Jesus and letting His love affect the world in which we live; by extending the grace to the unworthy; by exercising the forgiveness God gives to us; by helping and setting people free from sin and shame; by sharing the news that God is with us even in our sufferings; and, by proclaiming resurrection and eternal life even in the face of death.

Friends, we, the Church, have been given the keys of God's kingdom. The power of the keys is the proclamation of the Gospel and in the declaration of the forgiveness of sins to all who repent. The power is not of our making, it is given by Jesus, the Christ, Son of the living God, and made possible by His death and resurrection (v.19). Because of *Him* no weapon formed against God's Church will succeed.

Christ is indeed the rock of our salvation – so, we need not be ashamed as we trust, believe and live in Him. Friends, even a simple, humble confession, spoken with a tiny amount of faith, or shared by a loving deed, is powerful to do God's kingdom work and drive the darkness away. So let us continue to boldly proclaim Jesus as Saviour and Lord, in all we do, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Pray: Thank you Father for our Living Lord Jesus and the faith you give us in Him. Bless and help us as we share your great love in all we do and say. Amen.