

Homily for August 23rd, 2020 – 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

A little bit of context usually helps us understand the Word of God better. Here goes. Hezekiah was a good king in Judah. Although appointed by the pagan emperor in Rome, the king in Judah was still a Jewish king, and he looked after the interests of his Jewish brothers and sisters making sure they could still practice their faith in the one, true God with little interference from Rome. Unfortunately, Hezekiah's chief of staff, the highest ranking official in the king's court, Shebna, was not so good. God sends the prophet Isaiah to say to Shebna ***"I will thrust you from your office; you will be pulled down from your post"***. This crooked official was using the king's money, without the king knowing it, to build himself a tomb in his own honour. Little wonder he gets fired. In hindsight, we could say he was "digging his own grave."

Contrast that with Jesus, who is not just some high-ranking official trying to make a name for himself; he is the Messiah of the world. Jesus sternly warns his disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Christ. They were to keep it secret. However, somebody must have squealed. Somebody in the Early Church must have told someone else, who told someone else, who eventually told us that Jesus was the Christ, otherwise we would not be here today. Maybe the reason he wants to keep his identity hidden, for now, is connected to Jesus' expression of not throwing your pearls to the pigs, like I mentioned in last weekend's homily.

Pearls need to be valued, appreciated, treasured, turned over in the hand, and marvelled at by the owner before they can be appreciated by others. Never give over what is deepest and most precious in you to someone who cannot appreciate it. The disciples knew Jesus was the Christ, the pearl of great price in their lives, but unfortunately they only knew it in their heads. An intellectual belief, a credal statement that comes from my mouth, the bishop's mouth, the pope's mouth, a saint's mouth, or even from the mouth of Jesus, will not change your life. Words are only words until they are experienced, lived and even suffered over; then they have real power.

The disciples knew Jesus was the Christ; he told them so. But these were only words at this stage. Until Jesus went through his own transformation, his own suffering, death and resurrection, he knew his claim to being God's Christ would not have the power to transform others. So, first Jesus has to live something before he becomes the pattern for his disciples' lives. He could not just say to

others, “Take up your cross” and leave it at that. He has to go to the cross himself. He has to go to the Cross, and then through the Cross into the resurrection in order to establish the pattern of dying and rising which is the fundamental pattern of each of our lives. Until then, nothing transformative will happen in Jesus’ life and nothing transformative will happen in your life and my life. I think that is why Jesus sternly warns his disciples to tell no one that he is the Christ. This is just the opposite of many, not all, of our political leaders who lose no opportunity to put themselves out there for the world to admire. Jesus does everything to avoid taking titles of honor and privilege for himself.

This story of Peter’s profession of faith—that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God—happens at a place called Caesarea Philippi. The location is really important to the story. But first, another story that tells us the importance of location. ***This is a story of a boy who always enjoyed going into the forest. His father, a rabbi, asked his son why he went to the forest so often. The boy replied that in the forest he finds God there. The father reminded his son that he didn’t have to go to the forest to find God because God is the same everywhere. To which the son replied, “I know God is the same everywhere, but I am not.”***



Location is so important in Biblical stories. Remember how a few weeks ago we had the story of the multiplication of the fish and loaves. With the crowd of thousands miraculously fed, Jesus could have capitalized on self-promotion by asking his disciples, then and there, “Who do people say that I am?” Not just Peter, but everyone in unison would have proclaimed, “You are the Christ, the Son of

the Living God!” It would have been so easy to say that among thousand of well-fed people who just witnessed a miracle. But the question was not asked in that location. Instead, Jesus goes on a 40-km hike with his disciples to a place called Caesarea Philippi and only asks the question once he arrives there.

I have had the privilege of being at Caesarea Philippi twice. Why is this location so significant to the story? Caesarea Philippi was a stronghold for pagan worship, the worship of many gods, who in reality do not exist. First the Canaanites offered pagan worship there, then the Greeks, and finally, in Jesus' time, the Romans.

So, picture this massive wall of rock, a sheer cliff well over 100 feet high and 500 feet wide. The king in that part of the Roman Empire, Philip, has a pagan temple built there and names the place Caesarea Philippi in honor of the emperor in Rome, Caesar, and in honor of himself, Philip. Caesar himself was considered a god. Besides the large temple, niches which are still visible today were carved into the rockface that contained statues of pagan gods. This is what would have greeted Jesus and his disciples after their 40-km hike. This immense rockface represented power and control. Jesus takes his disciples to this very spot to make a point. "Who do you say that I am?" Did they see Jesus as just another god who will fill another niche in this rock wall? Imagine what was going on inside of these guys standing before a backdrop of a temple to Caesar and a massive rock wall honoring false gods, and having Jesus look into their eyes and ask, "Who do **you** say that I am?"

Peter in a moment of inspiration and courage, speaks truth to power and dares to say, "You are the Christ, Son of the Living God." It was not flesh and blood that revealed this to Peter but his faith in God, the Living God. With that 10-story rock in the background, Jesus looks at Peter and calls him Kephias, Aramaic for "rock." Some rock! This is the Peter who told Jesus to send the crowds away



hungry before the feeding of the multitude. This is the Peter who lost his faith and began to sink in the water. This is the Peter whom Jesus will call "Satan" in next weekend's gospel. Peter, this mixture of wheat and weeds, is called "rock" and is called to be a rock—to be a foundation that Christ will use to build his church. Peter on that day dug deep within himself and spoke courageously and truthfully. He found the space of Spirit within himself, and he spoke from that space. If he

could do it once, perhaps he could do it again. And perhaps Peter taught other to speak and live from that space, and those people told others, who told others who, eventually, told us.

And now it is our job to tell, not just with our mouths but more so with actions, that Jesus is indeed the Christ, Son of the Living God. Peter spoke truth to power in one of the most difficult and dangerous places in the known world at the time. Like Peter, we often find ourselves in positions where taking a faith stance will not make us popular in the eyes of society. It might cost us a friendship, a job, or cause derision or mockery. Taking a faith stance will always be counter cultural. Yet, when that faith stance come from a deep place within us we can trust it is solid as a rock and it will be the very thing God will use to build the Church and transform the world. Like Peter, you are not perfect, but you are rock, and upon you God continues to build the Church.

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