

Homily - August 26th and 27th, 2023
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time



You've all heard the expression, "words are cheap." For the most part, they really are. What sticks with us much more than words are actions. Yet, occasionally, we'll remember words that inspired us or put us on a path in life we never would have chosen on our own without those words. Maybe pearls of wisdom were dropped on your lap 40 years ago by a parent, and you are still being guided by those words to this day.

When Peter answered Jesus' question, ***"Who do you say that I am?"*** with, ***"You are the Christ, Son of the living God,"*** those words were not cheap. Sometimes words take on extra significance either because of who spoke them or because they are spoken in trying circumstances. For example, 60 years ago (August 28, 1963), Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous "I have a dream" speech, which still touches and influences people all over the world. His words and Peter's words, "You are the Christ, Son of the living God" both required courage to speak.

We are told Peter made this profession of faith in a place called Caesarea Philippi. Geography often plays an important role in peoples' faith, just as Lourdes, Fatima, and the Holy Land do for lots of Catholics. If you go to Israel, to the Golan Heights, you won't find Caesarea Philippi; it's been renamed Banias. I had the privilege of being in Banias twice with parishioners and friends. Banias is dominated by a sheer rockface with water flowing out from the bottom. This area had such a strong identification with the underworld and evil that it was known as the gates of Hades. In the rockface of this mountain are niches where marble statues of pagan gods were placed and worshipped. In front of this huge rockface, Jesus says that Peter's faith will be the rock upon which he will build his Church. In front of the gates of Hades, Peter's faith and the Church itself will be victorious.

Way back in history, before the birth of Jesus, the Canaanites claimed this place and turned it into a place of worship for one of their pagan gods, Baal. We met up

with a Canaanite woman from last weekend's readings, the one who Jesus said, "Woman, great is your faith." After the Canaanites moved on, the Greeks moved in and replace the statues of Baal with statues of their own pagan god, Pan. From Pan we get the word "pan flute," the instrument played by Pan. We also get the word "panic." When Pan played his pan flute it immediately sent opposing armies into panic. And lastly, the name Peter Pan is based on this Greek pagan god called Pan. In honour of their god, Pan, the Greeks called this place Panias. When the Greeks were displaced by the Romans, the Romans removed statues dedicated to Pan put up their own huge marble statues dedicated to the Roman Emperor, thus they named this place Caesarea Philippi, the name we heard in today's gospel reading.

Centuries later, the Roman Empire collapses and the Muslims take over the site. The Muslims brought a new language to the regions, Arabic. The Arabic language lacks a P sound; the closest they have is a B sound. So, what was once called Panias after the Greek god, Pan, was changed by the Muslims to Banias, the name we have today. So if you go to northern Israel, you won't find the Biblical name Caesarea Philippi, but you'll find Banias.

What has all this geography and all these name changes have to do with Peter's profession of faith or with us?

Maybe this quote from a book I read over 30 years ago says it best. ***They had come to Caesarea Philippi, a city once associated with the worship of Baal, where the Greeks claimed their god of nature, Pan, was born, and which now displayed a white marble temple for the worship of Caesar. Here comes a homeless wandering preacher from Galilee with his little company of uneducated village-bred bumpkins. Surrounded by the memories of the old Canaanite and Greek gods, in the presence of the symbol of Roman power and divinity, Jesus asks a leading question: "Who do you say that I am?"***

Peter is quick to reply: "You? You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!"

"I know it is no light matter," Peter seems to be saying, "I know it is no light matter to call anyone the Son of God. Surely, here amid all these memories of idolatry and in the midst of this blasphemous assertion that Caesar is divine, I must beware. But even here I do not shrink from the assertion that you are the

long-awaited Messiah. Even here, in my strict monotheistic belief in the one God, I say there is no other explanation for what I have seen and heard these years in your presence but that you are the Son of the Living God."

Peter's profession of faith reminds me of April 20, 1999, the date of the Columbine High School massacre in Columbine, Colorado. 12 students and one teacher were killed, while 24 others were injured. One of those who lost her life was a 17-year-old named Rachel Scott. The killers, two grade-12 boys, mocked Rachel for her Christian faith and asked her if she believed in God. When she courageously answered, "You know I do," that was the end of her. That was the end of her earthly life, but her witness to her faith goes on.

It wasn't easy for Peter 2,000 years ago to witness to his faith, it wasn't easy for Rachel Scott to do so in 1999, and it's still a challenge for you and me today. Schools, prisons, and ordinary workplaces can be hostile places for people to live their faith or even say they believe in God. There are so many people around the world, and not just Christians, who are daily persecuted for their faith.

Words can be cheap, or they can reveal the depth of someone's convictions. Let's pray for the courage to live our faith not just with words but also with conviction.

~Fr. Phil