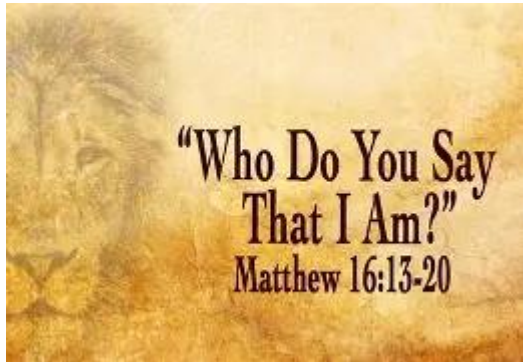


Homily – June 29th, 2025 – Feasts of Saint Peter and Saint Paul



I had the privilege twice of making it to the Holy Land and visiting Caesarea Philippi, the setting for today's gospel story. It's no longer called Caesarea Philippi but Banias. It was easy to be there, take in the history, and snap a few pictures, and move on. But it wasn't so

easy for Peter 2,000 years ago. Jesus dared to ask the questions, "Who do *people* say that I am?" and "Who do *you* say that I am?" If you are going to ask an honest question, you better be ready for an honest answer. It takes honesty because you are not in control of peoples' answers, how they perceive you. Jesus didn't shy away from peoples' honest answers and wasn't offended when he was compared to John the Baptist, or Elijah, or just one of the prophets. It also took a lot of courage on Peter's side when he made the proclamation, "***You, Jesus, are the Christ, Son of the living God.***"

Why did it take such courage on Peter's part to come up with such a statement, such a truth? Because of the ground they were standing on. Caesarea Philippi was a pagan stronghold. It would have been a lot easier for Peter to say, "You are the Christ, Son of the living God" in the safe confines of the Temple in Jerusalem. Same for us; it's easy to profess our faith here surrounded by believers. But Caesarea Philippi was far from the safety of Jerusalem. Like I said, this place was a sanctuary for pagan gods. Firstly, the Canaanites erected a sanctuary to their god call Baal. Later, the Greeks took over the place and built a sanctuary to the Greek

god called Pan. Lastly, in Jesus' time, the Romans took the place over and called it Caesarea Philippi. The Romans falsely believed that Caesar, the most powerful ruler of the known world, was divine. In front of a huge white marbled temple dedicated to Caesar, Peter dares to say, "You, Jesus, not Caesar, not Pan, not Baal...but you, Jesus...are the Christ, Son of the living God. These are *dead* gods, who never really existed, but you are the *living* God."

When Peter spoke those words, they came from a deep place of faith and conviction. This place was so deep within Peter that Jesus says, "You didn't get this on your own...you're not that smart, Peter...but my Father in heaven revealed this to you. But good for you, Peter, to proclaim the truth that my Father put on your lips."

Caesarea Philippi, in Jesus' time, was a Roman army camp housing thousands of Roman soldiers. It would have been so easy for Peter to simply keep his mouth shut and say nothing until they were on friendlier ground, anywhere else but here. But he couldn't keep his mouth shut. He couldn't shrink away from the truth that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. He had no other explanation for what he had seen and heard in Jesus' presence except to say, "You are the Son of the living God."

On this Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, we have two different saints who came to believe in Christ in two very different ways. Paul's conversion was more instantaneous. He was knocked to the ground by a flashing light while he was on his way to persecuting Christians. The light temporarily blinded Paul, and the voice

coming from the light revealed himself to Paul as Jesus. Peter's journey is probably closer to ours. Peter comes to know and love Jesus gradually and slowly through many trials and failures. But each failure didn't discourage him but makes him push on all the more.

Peter even ends up in prison bound in chains, as we heard in that first reading, because of his belief in the one true God revealed in Jesus. It was one thing to speak the words, "You are the Son of the living God," but now he was living it.

Caesarea Philippi was, in Jesus' time, a military stronghold with thousands of Roman soldiers. Speaking of military bases, if you ever make it to Trenton, Ontario—halfway between Kingston and Toronto--you will find C.F.B. (Canadian Forces Base) Trenton there. It's not a large town but interestingly its Catholic church is called "St. Peter In Chains" Roman Catholic Church. It was built in 1847, and I assume it got its name from the story we heard about Peter being released from his chains by an angel of the Lord.

Here's a little story not about Caesarea Philippi nor C.F.B. Trenton in Ontario, but a military base somewhere.

Nine young soldiers had received overnight passes from their base camp. When morning came, not one of the nine was present. An hour after their absence was noted, the first of the soldiers straggled back into camp. He was immediately taken before his company commander. "I'm sorry to be late, sir," the soldier said, "but I had a date, lost track of time, and missed the last bus. I wanted to make it

back on time, so I took a taxi. About halfway back to camp, the cab broke down, so I went to the nearest farm and bought a horse. As I was riding the horse, the animal suddenly fell to the ground and died. So, I did the last mile on foot and here I am.” Although he was skeptical about the chain of weird excuses, the company commander let the young man off with a mild lecture on the virtues of punctuality. Thereafter seven more stragglers reported in, one by one, each with the same story! They had a date, lost track of time, missed the last bus, took a cab, cab broke down, bought a horse, horse fell dead. Finally, the ninth and last soldier arrived. Now totally exasperated, the commanding officer growled, “What happened to you?” The ninth man replied, “I had a date, lost track of time, missed the last bus, hired a taxi...” “Wait a minute! Wait a minute!” cried the officer. “Are you going to tell me that the cab broke down?” “No, sir,” the soldier replied. “The taxi was fine. The problem was we couldn’t get through. There were so many dead horses on the road.”

That story has so many people making up so many excuses. Peter and Paul could not come up with a single excuse to shy away from their belief in Jesus and the Kingdom of God he came to proclaim. They proclaimed it in season and out of season, surrounded by friends and encircled by enemies, when they were free and when they were imprisoned. I love the way Paul put it in that second reading, *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, himself, will give me.”* I picture Paul in a race entering a stadium where he is way behind every other runner. They are all greeted with cheers. When Paul finally makes it into the stadium, on the final leg of the race, the crowd has gone

home. Only a few hecklers jeer at him, but he finishes the race, nonetheless. There is no one at the finish line except the Lord himself who places the crown of righteousness upon Paul's head.

Like Peter and Paul, we too will have to speak our truth and live our truth. The ground we stand on and the people surrounding us may not want to hear it. It will always be easier to make up excuses about all the dead horses on the road. Or it might be safer to say nothing at all. But in the end, we keep running the race because we have no other explanation for all that we have heard and seen in this Jesus. He is truly the Son of the living God.

~Fr. Phil