Sermon for Stowe Sunday 27th August 2023 at 9.45

Romans 12: 1-8

Matthew 16: 13-20

Pray

Our verses from Matthew are set in the region of Caesarea Philippi. Why did Jesus take his disciples there?

Well, to put this into context, Jesus is nearing the end of his time on earth, and he knows it, and he is taking every opportunity to teach his few followers all they will need to survive and thrive in the post-Jesus era. So to escape the crowds (and the Jewish authorities who were after him) he withdrew to the town of Caesarea Philippi. Which is beautiful – Susan and I went there as part of our visit to the Holy Land in 1997. One of the sources of the river Jordan is there. We’ll come to that later.

Caesarea Philippi, about 25 miles north-east of the Sea of Galilee, was outside the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas ruler of Galilee and in the domain of Philip the Tetrarch. Philip had renamed the capital, which used to be called Panias, re-naming it Caesarea Philippi in honour both of the Emperor Caesar and himself. If you go there today they call it Banias – or, more commonly, it’s still called Caesarea Philippi. It was largely a non-Jewish area.

So you can see why Jesus chose this remote area to spend time with his closest followers, away from other distractions. You see, Jesus wanted, above all, to make sure at least some of the disciples knew exactly who he was, so the church could be established and Jesus’ mission could continue. This was the beginning of a whole new religion, and Caesarea Philippi would be a good contrasting place to do so because of all the pagan temples around. Someone estimated the city would have contained at least 14 Syrian temples dedicated to Baal-worship. Also nearby was a huge cave which was both the source of the Jordan but also supposedly the birthplace of the god Pan, god of nature - which is why the original city name was Panias. And one further thing: The city housed a vast white marble temple created to worship Caesar, built by Herod the Great. He was called Great, by the way, mainly because he was a great builder.

So in these pagan surroundings, with the forces of paganism all around them, Jesus chooses to pose this question: ‘Who do the public think I am?’

Just picture the scene for a moment: here is a homeless, penniless Galilean carpenter, with twelve very ordinary men gathered round him. The Orthodox Church is after his blood, believing him to be a heretic. They stand in an area littered with temples of Syrian gods; in the place where ancient Greek gods looked down; where the white marble splendour of the home of Caesar-worship dominated the landscape. And there, of all places, this amazing carpenter stands and asks these men who they believe him to be, and expects the answer: the Son of God. It’s as if Jesus deliberately sets himself against a background of the earth’s religions with all their history and their splendour, and demands to be compared with them and to have the verdict given in his favour. There can be few places in the NT where Jesus’ consciousness of his own divinity shines out with more dazzling light.

Notice Jesus doesn’t go straight in with the important question : ‘Who do you think I am?’ He leads into it by asking first what public opinion says. ‘Who do people say that I am?’

A variety of answers come from the disciples. Some thought it was John the Baptist, recently beheaded. Some say it’s Elijah or Jeremiah back from the dead. By suggesting it was Elijah, they were saying Jesus was as great as the greatest of the OT prophets. To this day, Jews expect Elijah to come back, and they even leave a vacant chair at the Passover feast in case he returns, to be followed by the Messiah (whoever that is). The coming of Elijah, or Jeremiah, means the Messiah and his new Kingdom won’t be far behind. So they were paying Jesus a great compliment.

And so Jesus moved on to the crucial question: ‘And you; who do you say that I am?’

Imagine the impact of that question on the disciples. Perhaps there was a period of silence as it was considered. Then Peter – well, who else? – spoke up for them all. ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’

Hurray for Peter – you’ve done something right! You’ve said the right thing! Peter the impetuous, always putting his foot in it, often being told off by Jesus – it is Peter who gets it right. And Jesus now knew there was at least someone who recognised him as the Messiah. the Anointed One, Son of the Living God. At last. Yes, Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

The word Messiah and the word Christ are the same, one in Hebrew and one in Greek. It means Anointed one – monarchs have for centuries been anointed to office by anointing with oil, and still are, as you may remember from the recent Coronation service.

What can we learn from this event?

First, we learn that there is no human category into which we can place Jesus. When the crowds described Jesus as a returning Elijah or Jeremiah, they thought they were putting Jesus into the highest category they could find. But it is not possible to categorise Jesus in any human terms. Once Napoleon Bonaparte was asked for his verdict on Jesus. He said: ‘I know men; and Jesus Christ is more than a man.’ In Peter’s confession there is realisation that you can’t put Jesus in a box, or in any human category.

Second, we find that discovering Jesus has to be personal. ‘And you – who do ***you*** think I am?’ It’s a question we all have to answer individually at some time. Someone might know all about Jesus, having read the Bible, and know everything written by theologians and scholars about him, and yet still not be a Christian. It must be a personal thing. It’s not knowing about Jesus – it is knowing Jesus. That’s what real discipleship is all about.

What happened next? Well, Jesus praises Peter for his insights. And I’m sure Peter would be glowing with pride. Of course we’re now at v.19 – by the time we get to v. 23, and we didn’t get as far as v.23, Jesus is having to tell Peter off again…

Peter didn’t get it, that the only way for Jesus to achieve everything was for him to be crucified by the authorities. Only later did he understand.

But let’s revel for a moment with Peter, back in vv 17-19 in Jesus’ warm words to Peter. Jesus was very good at puns. Here he uses Peter’s name in Greek, Petros, and calls him a rock – petra. His Aramaic name Cephas also means a rock, incidentally. ‘You are Petros, and on this petra I will build my church.’

We need to be a little careful here. It is not that the church is built on Peter, because we know the foundation stone is Jesus himself, the chief cornerstone. But Peter, in his answer ‘You are the Christ’ becomes the first member of the church and hence the first rock or stone on top of the foundation. Those who come after are built on him.

Jesus added, ‘I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.’ Do you know, I’ve always found that a bit odd, haven’t you? How can gates prevail? They don’t move, except to open or close!

There have been many attempted explanations. Try this one:

Gates are there to keep people in, especially, say, in a prison. Hades - not the same as Hell - was considered in those days to be a place where all people went after death. You could call them the gates of death. When Jesus went there, it was clear Hades couldn’t hold him, and he burst the gates and came out when he rose again to return to heaven. Likewise each Christian cannot be confined to Hades and will burst the gates open and go to be with Jesus. Hence the gates of death will not prevail against us because they cannot keep us locked in.

And one more thing Jesus said: he spoke about the keys of the kingdom, and binding or loosing. Again, this could be confusing. ‘I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven,’ said Jesus to Peter. Now the Roman Catholic church interpret these verses to mean Peter is the rock on which the church is built; Peter has the power to forgive sins; Peter has the authority to allow or deny entrance to the Kingdom; that he became Bishop of Rome and passes his authority on to succeeding Popes. Protestants, by contrast, believe it is Peter’s faith that is the rock, not Peter himself; and what Jesus was doing here was to make Peter Guardian of the kingdom, with keys to open the gates. And that happened; on the day of Pentecost, Peter opened the door to 3000 new church members; he opened the door to the Gentile Cornelius, and thereby to all Gentiles who will accept the faith, including you and me; and since Peter’s day each of us now hold those keys as we share our own faith story and usher new believers into God’s Kingdom. Remember: We invite people in to the kingdom – it is God who changes people so they can accept the invitation.

And what about binding and loosing, v19? To the Jews of the day, these words would be familiar; to bind means to forbid and to loose meant to allow. So Jesus is effectively saying to Peter, ‘You are going to have the heavy responsibilities laid upon you as Guardian of the Kingdom. You are going to have to make decisions which will affect the welfare of the whole church. You will be the guide and the director of this infant church. And the decisions you make will be so important, they will affect the souls of many in time and eternity.

So Peter would become the chief steward of the household of God, opening the door to people to enter the kingdom. The duties of binding and loosing meant that Peter would have to take decisions about the church’s life and practice which would have the most far-reaching consequences. And when we look in the early chapters of Acts, we find that in Jerusalem that is precisely what Peter did.

Peter had made the great discovery; and Peter was given the great privilege and the great responsibility. It’s a discovery which we must make for ourselves; and having made it, then the same privilege and the same responsibility is laid upon us, too.

Let’s be encouraged by Peter’s affirmation of Jesus as God’s Son, the Messiah. And let’s go into the coming week determined to share this knowledge with others we meet.

Pray.