

## Who do you say I am?

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Today's passage needs some context before we look at what is really important in this gospel. Now today's gospel breaks an important scene into two Sundays and since next Sunday we celebrate St. Aidan's feast day I'm going to extend the passage to include a portion of next week's gospel to complete this particular story. This is one of my frustrations with the lectionary as a storyteller because it often breaks the story in ways that can destroy the story itself. So here is what was left out.

Matt. 16:21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

The first important question to understand this passage is to know where they are? Caesarea Phillipi. This is where one of Herod's three palaces were located. He is in the extreme northern part of Israel at the source of the River Jordan and north of the Sea of Galilee. This area had numerous pagan temples and is as far from Jerusalem as you can imagine in many ways. Yet there is a history of divine revelation that had already happened there (Enoch) It was also the seat of political power since Caesar had given this area to Herod for his northern palace. Those who have been to Israel will probably have visited here. This is the place where the temples were cut into the hillside and the springs from underneath form the beginnings of the Jordan River. This is several miles north of the Sea of Galilee and is fairly hilly. By the way this is where I filled up several bottles with water to use in baptisms here at St. Aidan's. Keep all that setting in mind as I talk about this story.

Jesus is as far away from Jerusalem as he can get and still be within Israel. It is from this point where in Matthew's gospel he begins his long trip back to Jerusalem and the fate he knows awaits him. (This is why the omitted part is so important.) This scene follows the feeding of the 4000, remember there are two feeding miracles in Matthew. That should put Peter's comments into context.

Two or three weeks ago I talked about Ignatian methods of bible meditation. Today's passage is a classic example of one that works with a colloquy. You might take your bulletin home and place yourself in this story, possibly as one of the disciples. Picture in your mind the setting with the pagan temples in the hillside, the water coming out of the springs and the huge northern palace of Herod as part of the background. When you have read through the passage notice what things stand out to you. Then read it again and imagine after Peter has made his declaration that Jesus turns to you and says, "And who do you say that I am."

“Who do you say I am?” is a key question for any of us who are Christian because it is Jesus that makes us unique. We come from Jewish roots, of that there is no doubt, but Jesus is the difference for us. I watched some of your reactions when I proposed this little exercise and I sensed some discomfort from some of you. I’m sure Peter felt some of the same discomfort and probably surprise. I know when I did this meditation the first time, there was a definite squirm factor in how I responded.

Jesus responds to Peter’s declaration by saying “Blessed are you ...for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you by my Father in heaven.” Peter has given an answer from the heart because in his time what now seems like a theological formula was something new and was of divine inspiration.

Your answer can come in two ways. There is the head answer, which for us quotes centuries of doctrine. This is the answer you learned in Sunday School whether it was as a child, a youth or an adult. However in the colloquy that Ignatius teaches the answer needs to be from your heart. Who do you believe Jesus is in heart? This is no small question and maybe I should just leave my sermon at this point.

Then Jesus says, “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.” Now many see this as Peter being made the leader of the early church. I suspect James who ended up leading the church in Jerusalem might have something to say about that. Now a couple things about that statement. First of all Dr. Sheila McGinn at John Carroll University told me that the Greek word for rock can be translated as the pebble that irritates. Like when you get a pebble between your foot and your sandal. Now think about that in terms of what we know about Peter. This really fits because Peter is not solid rock, he is absolutely human and he proves it in just a few verses when Jesus calls him Satan!

Secondly Peter is not the rock, but Peter’s profession of faith and his declaration of who Jesus is, is in fact the rock upon which our faith, our church is built. This is a different way to look at this profession of faith. Again, the rock is the statement not Peter as a person. This is a statement that Jesus does have the keys to the kingdom and those who believe have the keys. The keys do not solely belong to Peter even if they are on the coat of arms for the Pope.

So please, take the time to sit with this important question. Mull it over on a walk this afternoon in this beautiful weather we have been graced with. Please make this a Sunday where what I have said causes you to be a little uncomfortable. If the answer pops into your head quickly spend some time and make sure it is what your heart believes. Some might say what if I’m not sure of the answer or I don’t like the answer I have. Then invite Jesus for a little more conversation. Ask him to show you who he is. Regardless of how this prayer and meditation go, give it a shot. I find the meditations which challenge me make me uncomfortable are often the most fruitful. In these days when our faith is being challenged a good solid answer from your heart is essential. Who do you say Jesus is?