

13th Sunday after Pentecost Matthew 16:13-20 Binding and loosing

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Peter's confession of Christ is a major turning point in Jesus' ministry – from here on he starts to make his way to Jerusalem and his death. So what happened here in Caesarea Philippi?

Over the last month or so we have seen various ways that Jesus has been teaching and training his disciples. That, out of time in the presence of God the Father, we can be filled with the same compassion that Jesus has in order to take our part in the great outpouring of God's perfect will.

Today, the training is starting to pay off.

What happened here in Caesarea Philippi, means that the great redemptive plan of God has moved into a higher gear. What happened of course was that Peter confesses Jesus as Messiah (as well as Son of the living God), which meant that Jesus could now show them exactly how the brand-new church was to be built. On him as Messiah, the Anointed One.

But first let's look at where this happened. Jesus has gone north again, 25 miles north-east of the Sea of Galilee. This is the territory of a different Herod, this one is Herod Philip (brother of Herod Antipas who beheaded John the Baptist), who changed the name of the district from Binnai to Caesarea Philippi, to curry favour with Rome. It happened to be the epicentre of pagan cults and shrines to gods.

The god Pan was meant to have been born there and the place was filled with pagan temples, and above all of them a huge new marble temple to the Emperor.

This was the place that Jesus really needed to know if the disciples understood him.

It is against this backdrop of pagan gods and Emperor worship, that Jesus, carpenter from Nazareth, asks the future church; "who do you say that I am?" (v.15).

Caesarea Philippi is not dissimilar to today. Jesus was and is unique, there is only one Jesus. He is not among all those others in their man-made shrines. Then, as now, people have a problem with the uniqueness of Jesus. Then as now Jesus asks us, 'who do you say that I am?'

In a place that worshipped anything at all but the living God, Jesus is proclaimed Messiah and Son of the living God by Peter.

So let's look at these names, they are as remarkable as the place. Jesus first asks, "who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (v.13).

Only Jesus ever describes himself as the Son of Man. It could mean a lot of things, but in today's context, it refers to Jesus' fulfilling of the prophesy of Daniel (7:13-14):

"I saw one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven... To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, ... His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away,

and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.”

The name Messiah (Hebrew) or Christ (Greek) means ‘Anointed One,’ who will come and fulfil and be the hope Israel. It is only priests, kings and prophets who were anointed.

The Messiah fulfils all three of these roles. Like a Jewish priest, except perfectly, he brings people into the presence of Holies. Like a prophet, but perfectly, he shows people what God is like. And like a King, but perfectly, he exercised God’s rule over God’s people and like a warrior King gave his life for his people.

Now throughout the gospels, Peter is often the spokesman for the disciples and is always first named in the lists of the disciples. When Jesus asks them “who do you say I am?” (the ‘you’ is plural), Peter, as spokesman, replies with the conclusion that they have come to, brought about by all they had seen and experienced.

Multiple healings! The dead raised! The feeding of multitudes! Jesus walking on water! Peter walking on water! Unlike the others who said Jesus was, or was like, another human, Peter and the disciples can no longer use human ways to describe who Jesus is.

God has now revealed to the disciples who he is. “You are the Messiah! The Son of God!” (v.16, my exclamation marks).

This is the first time anyone directly addresses Jesus as Messiah in this gospel, and Jesus, full of joy I suspect, says ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven’.

Only God can reveal God. We can never know Jesus in any other way, we can’t get to know who Jesus is by our cleverness. So the disciples are now on the same page as Jesus regarding his identity, if not to how all of God’s great redemptive plan for the world will play out.

The last verses of today’s passage have been an absolute battleground and bit of a fault line between Catholics and Protestants: “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (16:18-19)

We don’t have time to discuss the issues but essentially the question is: is Peter the one on whom the Church will be built? One person? Or is it the confession itself that Jesus is Messiah, the rock on which the church will be built?

Scripture itself helps us here because in 2 chapters time in this very gospel, Jesus says exactly the same thing about binding and losing, but to all the disciples, not exclusively Peter (Matt 18:18). So, in my opinion, what Jesus is saying to Peter is that on the rock of you disciples, of whom you are the spokesman and unacknowledged leader, I will build my Church.

When we look at the book of Acts, this is exactly what happens, with Peter leading the way in the earliest planting of God's people, that Jesus calls here for the first time, "my church."

In Judaism, to bind and to loose was to allow or disallow certain conduct, based on Jewish Law. Now in Jesus, we have all truth and the absolute fulfilment of the Law. Peter has just confessed Jesus as Messiah and so to him and the other disciples (therefore to us) comes the authority to be authorised interpreters to others of the person and teaching of Jesus.

To the disciples have been given the power of the keys to the Kingdom of God. We can proclaim the great forgiveness of God, or we can withhold it. If people respond to the conditions of the gospel of Jesus and they respond and believe, they can be confidently assured by us disciples that God has forgiven them.

Jesus is very clear on this, he is also very clear that if the gospel conditions are refused, their sins are not forgiven.

So out of this great confession by Peter, the confession that each and every one of us has to make, right in the middle of the most pagan city in Israel, the disciples of Jesus, Jesus very own people (ecclesia) are given authority to decide with divine authority what is truth and what is falsehood.

We may be a small parish, but we are vital and filled with the hope of God. We too have this authority, and we too know a falsehood when we hear it! So let's be confident in what we know to be the beautiful compassionate truth of Jesus Christ, who loved us and died for us, rose again and ascended to the Father and is with us always. Let me pray ...