

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

August 23, 2020

Matthew 16:13-20

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Let's get straight into the text

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi...

OK, let's pause here

As we hear this account it's good to pay attention to the fact

That the location is specified.

Sometimes in the Gospels we don't need to pay attention to the location

Like in the parable of the unjust judge and the widow (Luke 18)

Jesus says, **'In a certain city there was a judge...'**

It doesn't matter where, that's not the point.

But today's action happens *in a specific place*

The district of Caesarea Philippi.

In Jesus day and place there were two cities called Caesarea

Just like in South Australia there are two towns called Kingston

This Caesarea was at the northern most border of Israel.

Scholars offer opinions on the significance of the place,

I'll mention two opinions today.

One is that at this Caesarea was significant

Because it on the border into gentile territory

That it was contested area *politically*

That it opened up to the mission area of the church.

The other is that this Caesarea was significant because

It had temples to the god Pan, to the god Baal,

And to the deified Caesar, that it was contested area *religiously*

So that the central question of the Gospel that will come up

Comes within the context of religious pluralism.

Now the text doesn't say these things explicitly.

But the text does invite our questions and opinions.

Let's go on, **Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?'**

This is the first time in the Gospel that Jesus puts to the disciples

The question of his own identity

In the Gospel Jesus uses the term 'Son of Man' about himself

Including when he describes himself coming in glory to judge.

Here he's asking the disciples first of all about what they've heard
About what they've heard *others* say about him
They have answers at the ready: **And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.'**
What these answers have in common is that they are all prophets
And that they are no longer alive
The text doesn't go into further detail here
Because Jesus goes on to ask what is, to my mind
The central question of the Gospels
The question that resonates down to this day
He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'
The stage is set here for Peter's great confession of faith

Lets' pause here
You know very well that every Sunday as we gather together
We make some confession of our faith in Christ
We use the Apostles' Creed; the Nicene Creed
On occasion also the Athanasian Creed.
Because these confessions are a routine part of our worship
It can be easy to tune out; to forget what we are doing.
It is good for us to remember that our confessions of faith
Come in the history of the church
As a response to this fundamental question of Jesus
Listen now to the first Christian confession of faith
Made in response to Jesus' question:
Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

Again, lets Pause.
As I mentioned a few weeks back
Margaret and I recently celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary
On my wedding day if you'd asked the university who Margaret was
They would have said that she was a student
If you'd asked the Australian government
They would have said that she was a student
If you'd asked her mum and dad
They would have said that she was a daughter
But if you'd asked me
I would have said. 'She is my *wife*'
I would have used a word for her, a title for her

That described not just a truth about her
But also about the nature of my relationship with her
One given by God in marriage
I would learn what it means for me to call Margaret my wife
Not by defining the title in words, *but by living with her*
I think this is one analogical way of thinking about Peter's confession
He is not only confessing who Jesus is
But acknowledging Jesus' authority over him
Let's listen again: **Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'** **And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.**
The confession that Simon makes is not based on human reason
But comes as a revelation from God.
That a confession of trust is a divine gift
Is part of our tradition as Lutheran Christians
Think about the words of the Small Catechism: *I believe that on my own I can never come to Jesus Christ my Lord or believe in him, no matter how hard I try. But the Holy Spirit has called me to Jesus by the good news about him.*
It's because our confession of faith is a divine gift
That it has such a central role in our life together as God's people

Listen to how Jesus continues, **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.**
In the history of the church there has been much debate
About what the 'rock' that Jesus builds on is
Is it Christ himself? Is it Peter?
(After all, the name that Jesus gives him means 'Rocky')
The most common opinion in the early church
And one that is part of our own tradition is that
The rock upon which the church is built
Is Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ
The Son of the living God
In other words:
When we get the answer to Jesus' question 'Who do you say that I am?' right
When we answer that he is the Christ, that his is God's Son
Then we will build on a firm foundation
That not even death can overcome
Then we have life in the church, that community
That has its unity in the forgiveness of sins that Jesus gives

The link between confession and Christian community
Is made by Jesus as the narrative goes on:

[Jesus said,] 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.'

Again, there is much debate about what these words mean
And it seems to me that there are different and complimentary
Explanations that can be given

Today I want to go down one path of interpretation

Suggested by Matthew 18 and John 20

And enacted in the liturgy of the church

And that is that this is one place

Where the church is given the authority to forgive sins

Remember words that we hear regularly in our liturgy:

Christ gave to his church the authority to forgive the sins of those who repent, and to declare to those who do not repent that their sins are not forgiven'.

The pastoral goal in binding and loosing

Is to bring people back to God

To bring them to a place where they admit the very real need that they have

And to receive the healing and peace that comes from faith in Christ

Jesus came as the Messiah to take upon himself our sin

And to reconcile us to the Father

To free us from the chains of sin

And to bring us into the freedom of living as sons and daughters of God

This can help us make sense of the last verse in today's reading:

[Jesus] sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

This can seem strange to us as Christian people

After all, aren't we meant to tell people about Jesus?

Isn't that part of the Great Commission?

But as we will hear next week, it is not strange in context

Jesus is going to start telling his disciples

What the word 'Messiah' really means

What it means for him to be the Christ

It means that he will not be walking a path of worldly glory

- And this is evidently what Peter thought it meant -

But that he will take the path to the cross

Dear baptised people
Let's confess with Peter who Jesus is
That he is the Christ, the Son of the living God
And let's, with Peter, grow in our understanding of what this means
As we live with Jesus in the community of the church
Where we confess our sins
Where we receive the forgiveness that he won for us
And where we mature in love
As we near each other's burdens
And love each other as God first loved us.
In Jesus' name. Amen.