

Matthew 16: 13-20

In the last few weeks, we have been reading about various events in the life of Jesus and his disciples. He walks on water, feeds five thousand plus with 5 loaves and two fishes, he heals a Canaanite woman's daughter who was possessed with a demon, and he tells us it is what comes out of our mouth that defiles us. A good warning about gossip. He has been a busy guy.

Today's gospel reading takes place outside of Galilee. It is a short story but with many details hidden in it. There is much more here than what we get from a casual read. Verse 13 tells us they stopped in a place called Caesarea Phillippi. It is 25 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee. Far away from the Jewish people who have been following him for days. And it is in an area they would not likely be following him to.

Away from the crowds seeking healing and listening to his preaching. Jesus and his disciples needed a rest. This was gentile territory, and the Gospel or good news would not be preached here until after Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension. Caesarea Phillippi was a place with many temples where the gods of the Roman pantheon were worshiped along with Syrian and Greek gods and goddesses. So why stop here? Why would the Son of God, the one and only God stop here where many pagan gods were worshipped.

Caesarea Phillippi was a beautiful town. All those temples to false gods were built out of white marble which would be glistening in the blue Mediterranean sky but it was not a random stop. Nothing Jesus did was accidental or random. Here in the backdrop of this heathen city, Jesus will ask his disciples if they believed he was the son of the living God.

William Barclay in his commentary on Matthew's gospel says about this passage; "Here is a homeless, penniless, Galilean carpenter with twelve ordinary men around him and he asks them who do the people

say that the Son of Man is?” Jesus receives many answers to this question. Some say Elijah or Moses, or Jeremiah, or other prophets. But Jesus looks at them again, and I can only imagine that look might be a bit scary and intimidating. He says to them ok, but who, my friends, do you say that I am? And Peter, always on the ball says, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God’. (not a god made of stone or wood.

This story appears in each of the three Synoptic Gospels. In Mark, Peter simply says ‘you are the Messiah (or Christ)’. In Luke’s Gospel the answer is ‘the Messiah of God’. Jesus blesses Peter for getting the message of who Jesus really is, but, and this is important, Jesus tells him the message is God’s, and Peter was open to receiving it.

After Peter’s answer the conversation changes and Jesus tells Peter “You are Peter,” (which means rock), “and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” To be a Christian means believing that Jesus is the Christ, God the son. He is not some lifeless idol sitting in a pretty temple. He is fully human and fully divine, and he has just given Peter his marching orders. He also has work for us to do as well. What kind of rock are we? How will we allow Christ to build his church in us? And what will the fruits of this indwelling be?

As I have shared in the past, my role as a deacon postulant or deacon in training, is to take what the church can give to the world out into the community and bring back the needs of the community to the church so we can act upon it. My personal focus is on outreach. Some Deacons excel at pastoral care. Outreach has many meanings but here I am talking about fulfilling my Baptismal vows, which we all are called to do. We are called to seek Christ and serve Christ in all people, loving my neighbour as myself and respecting the dignity of all human beings. And as we know, this can be darn hard work.

The Rev. Mitzi Smith in her sermon on this text ends with this; Jesus did not tell Peter on this rock I will build churches that oppress the poor, the hungry, or the homeless, or a church that turns a blind eye to violence around us or even in our neighbourhood. We are to build a church that uses our gifts to care for those around us whatever their need. And God will bless us with the gifts we need to do what we have been called to do. We are not to think we don't have the skills needed. God will provide. Neither are we to remain spectators or observers.

Who do we say Jesus is and how will we let him build his church in us? If we are not quite there with our question, a simple prayer to ask God to show you the way. Don't be afraid to ask for help in understanding what great things God can do through us. And when we do ask God to help our faith, we best be prepared for the answer. Who do you say I am!

Amen