

Matthew 16:13-30
Upon This Rock
Sunday March 13, 2016

The setting for this most important of all questions of Jesus, “Who do YOU say that I am?” was the District of Caesarea Philippi.

Most probably would think “So what?” What does the place have to do with the question?

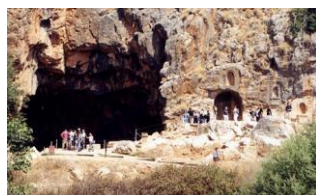
We today, can miss the importance of this place for Jesus’ most important question, because the importance of this place has disappeared from our common memory.

Caesarea Philippi was named in honor of Caesar Augustus by a local ruler named Philippi and thus it got its name. It lay outside of Israel to the north at the head waters of the river Jordan. This area was a place of intense and grandiose idol worship. At the time that Jesus asked his question there were at least 14 ancient Syrian Baal temples in Caesarea Philippi. Baals were generally fertility gods and if you open almost any popular magazine, listen to any popular music, or watch any popular media you will see many still worship gods like them today.

In the background of this town was a huge white marble temple built for the worship of Caesar and the Roman Empire.



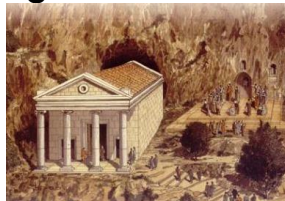
No one could go into this region without seeing this white gleaming structure. It was also the site of a huge cavern and spring that was the headwaters for the Jordan River.



This cavern was believed by many to be the birthplace of the Greek god Pan, who was worshipped there as the god of music. And it was also seen as a gateway to the “underworld”, or “Hades” or “Hell”.

Caves in the ancient world were seen as gateways to the underworld or hell.

In the backdrop then of Jesus’ question were the towering monuments and temples to the many religions and gods that were worshiped and served in that day. This is an artist’s reconstruction of what the temple to Caesar Augustus and Pan would have looked like.



If one but looked up from Jesus and this small band of disciples to see the awesome and impressive cultic architecture the seeming insignificance and powerlessness of Jesus and his 12 would grow.

But what are these cultic sites of worship today? Ruins! Where are their followers today? Dead and gone!!



As Jesus asked his question, “Who do you say that I am?” the fate of these ancient cults was sealed. They began to die.

In all these temples that surrounded the 12 and Jesus, the stone and wood idols stood lifeless, silent, and powerless as Jesus asked a question that would change the world. Today, there are over 2.2 billion people who answer Jesus’ question, “**You are the Christ (or Messiah) the Son of the living God.**” The lifeless, mute and powerless idols are no longer worshipped. Their adherents are gone. They were soon cast into insignificance by the One who stood in their midst, “the Son of the living God.”

Life and death, truth and falsehood were contrasted that day and life and truth, began to win and in fact “the gates of Hades”, which mean the powers of Hell. They will not overcome the Church and the true confession of faith.

In Jesus’ day the gates of a city were symbols of power and strength. Today Jesus might have said, “The powers of all the nuclear weapons in the world will not overcome the Church.”

Jesus’ question is the most important of all questions; it needs to be answered by each and every one of us. It needs to be answered for it forms who we are as individuals and as a church.

Jesus was the master Teacher. He picked this place for the contrast to the truth that he shared. He went from the general to the specific to nail down their understanding of him and his calling to save.

His first question was a general one, “Who do the PEOPLE say that I am?”

In verse 14 he gets 4 answers:

1. Some say John the Baptist
2. some say Elijah
3. still others say Jeremiah
4. or one of the prophets.

First, many believed that Jesus was John the Baptist reincarnated for they both spoke of the end of the age and the Judgment, and the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Second, many thought Jesus was Elijah returned to prepare the way for the Messiah. They didn’t believe, as Matthew later makes clear, that the one who came in the way of Elijah, to prepare the way for the Messiah, was John the Baptist.

Third, others thought Jesus was Jeremiah returned, because they took a verse out of the Apocrypha book Enoch that said to them that

Jeremiah also was a precursor like John the Baptist. Jeremiah also spoke of a new covenant as did Jesus.

Fourth, some said, “He is one of the prophets”, which was a high honor because. But calling Jesus simply a “prophet” was a totally inadequate understanding of Jesus. This of all the answers is one we hear most today that is used to dismiss Jesus and his Church and avoid his question, “Who do you say that I am?”

Many today that simply dismiss Jesus and his claims upon our lives refer to him as a prophet, or a great philosopher, or teacher, but not as the Messiah the Son of the living God. They do not refer to him as Lord.

They get a partially true answer, but one that is inadequate to know and understand Jesus. They are seduced by the towering gleaming temples of today and miss the small band of disciples that continues to challenge and change the world.

So Jesus still asks the question of us today, “Who do you say that I am?”

The correct answer of course is what Peter said, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” Now “Messiah” or “Christ” means, “the anointed one.” That is the One chosen and appointed by God for a specific purpose. Jesus was to be the sacrifice for the sins of the world.

This was so in contrast to what Peter, the 12, and the rest of the people thought of the Messiah being and doing. They thought the Messiah would be a warrior King, a geopolitical ruler who would lead the armies of God to conquer all their enemies.

Jesus knew this, which is why in verse 20 he sternly ordered his disciples to tell no one he was the Messiah and began to teach them that he was to suffer and die for sin.

Peter had all the right words but the wrong understanding and rebuked Jesus in the next several verses, which evoked Jesus' response to him, "Get behind me Satan."

Jesus knew that at this point that if he was portrayed and preached as the Messiah/Warrior King and not the Suffering Servant; bloodshed, violence and defeat would soon follow; so He swore them to secrecy.

Jesus does not hold us to that secrecy today that he is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, but often by our silence, our failing to tell others of him you would think it was so.

Today in our world we face much the same religious situation. We preach and teach Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, but often in whispers rather than joyful shouts. And in the background are many religions both secular and religious that vie for our time, loyalty and ultimate trust. Their success makes us even more timid.

Now one of the most visible secular religions practiced today is sports. The most massive public structures built today are public sports venues. And like the temple to Caesar in Caesarea Philippi they are paid for with public money. Many today serve/worship sports rather than God. There are many such gods.

Remember to serve God is to worship God. That is why "worship times" are referred to as "services." It is also why we can "worship" outside a sanctuary. **When we work, or serve others, "as if unto the Lord" we are worshipping God.** So when we serve other things besides God we can easily slip into idolatry. Do we choose to be elsewhere in other commitments when the Body of Christ gathers? Or is our commitment first to God? From whatever you receive your ultimate meaning and purpose in life and thus serve, that is your god.

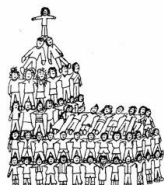
Long after the gods and religions of the present age are gone the Church will remain. The Universal Church of Jesus Christ will remain because its foundation is the Rock Jesus Christ. And those who are brought into the Church are brought into it by God to become its building blocks; its' living stones.

When Jesus said to Peter, “**Blessed are you, Simon son of John! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in Heaven.**” Jesus revealed that it is the Spirit that calls us into the Church.

We are here today because God called us here. We believe today because God has given us the power to believe. We believe today because the Holy Spirit has opened our minds to see and know who Jesus is.

And when we see and know who Jesus is the Holy Spirit calls us into a community called the Church. That is what we mean when we repeat the words of the Apostles creed and say we believe in the holy catholic church, which means the universal church, all who believe.

When we believe we become part of a community of believers who don't just have a new name Christian, but have a new identity, “a child of God, a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven, a living stone in the Church.”



Now this Universal Church we belong to will exist until the end of time. It will be in conflict with the forces of evil until the coming of the Kingdom of God. But the Church will exist and that is something to hold onto when you feel insignificant or think your church is insignificant. Its eternal for as Jesus said, “The gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.”

But who do you say Jesus is? Peter had the right words but a misunderstanding. The people of Jesus' day certainly misunderstood. Do you?

Do you say that He is “**Savior**”? If so that means that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is responsible for canceling your sins! Your good deeds have absolutely no power in earning forgiveness. Your guilt and shame cannot buy God off.

If you say that Jesus is “**Lord**” it means you are his servant. If he is Lord you are his slave. It means everything we have is his, since slaves can’t own anything. And if he is our Lord we must obey.

If you say that Jesus is “**Creator**” that means he is the creator of everything our enemies as well as our friends. He is the creator of all people of different religions, races and creeds. He is the creator of people you love as well as those you hate. He calls us to difficult love.

When Peter made his bold confession, Jesus bestowed upon him a most astonishing nickname. “**You are Petros; I will call you a rock, because your faith is so solid.**” And then Jesus went on to say, “**Upon this Rock I will build my Church.**” Jesus was referring to Peter’s confession not Peter himself.

Peter was the first to confess Jesus as Lord. His statement of faith was the first stone in building the Church that would come to worship the Cornerstone...Jesus the Messiah, the Christ.

The building of the Church has gone on generation after generation for the past 2000 years; each generation, each person becoming a living stone in this building as they confessed. Faithful people of every age have stood up and confessed Jesus as the Savior, and Lord.

We think of the saints and great stones in the Church like St. Peter, St. Paul, St. John, Martin Luther, John Wesley, and Mother Teresa. It was not easy for them, or for us, for we also stand in the midst of the gleaming white temples of idolatry today.

Friends, the time has come for each of us to stand up and be counted. Vague is no longer good enough. Lukewarm is no longer appropriate. Sincere confessions of faith are what the Messiah asks of us, because the world needs to see bold authentic witnesses.

And not just the world, but our fellow church members need to see the strength of our faith. Our children, and grandchildren, curious

colleagues, friends and neighbors need to hear from us the hope that is within us. Today, you hold in your hand a stone.



It symbolizes you. You may feel you are but a small part of the Church, especially when compared to the Saints of the past and present, but you are just as important!

You are a living stone in the church, the Body of Christ.



And this small stone also represents the times we have failed to witness to our faith, to confess our belief in the Messiah. It represents the times when we like Peter have denied knowing Jesus, we've misunderstood who he is and we've spoken without wisdom and knowledge.

So we will place these stones at the foot of the cross today as an acknowledgment of both our frailties and sin; and our importance to Jesus and his church for we place them at the foot of the cross.

The cross reminding us that for each one of us Jesus died.

So now, I invite the ushers to come forward and wait upon us. Place your stone in the plate as it goes by. Claim once again your place in the Church, a building not made with human hands, eternal in this world and in the heavens. Acknowledge your silence and pledge to speak in word and deed of Christ once more.

To help you with this, we have produced little flyers that you found in your bulletin to use to invite someone to worship with you this Holy season. Make a commitment to do this and be built into the body of Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.