

Homily: SS Peter & Paul 2020

One among many memorable places we visited on the Holy Land pilgrimages was to Caesarea Philippi. It is a beautiful spot at the foothills of the snow-capped Mount Hermon, where fresh clear water from the melting snow forms inviting pools, rivers and lovely cascades. Nowadays it is a nature reserve, in the far north of Galilee, above the disputed territory of the Golan Heights and near the UN buffer zone, and Lebanon and Syria. The Jordan River is formed from one of those streams, and on that occasion we renewed there our baptismal vows.

Before the time of Jesus and the Roman Empire, it had been conquered by Alexander the Great in 332 BC. Then Greek culture had been brought in, and there a Pantheon was constructed, a temple to the god Pan, the Greek god of flocks and herds who was worshipped with wild orgies. We could see some ruins of that temple. Its name was Paneas (Baniyas according to Arabic pronunciation who have no P in their alphabet).

At the time of Jesus it boasted a new temple in gleaming white marble, built by Philip, younger son of Herod the Great, who wanted to honour Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor. Philip settled there and changed its name from Baniyas, to Caesarea Philippi. It was Gentile territory, and a place of interchange in ideas & religion. The beauty and freshness of the place invited reflection, while its history was associated with changing names and new rulers.

It was while Jesus and his disciples were there that Jesus asks the question, “Who are they saying I am?”

It is safe to quote others, and in the anonymity of the group several answers are heard. What they tell Jesus is that people are saying that the great days of the past are alive again. All the great teachers and prophets of the past, all the leaders and miracles are now rolled up into the one person... ‘You, Master.’

‘Ah!’ says Jesus, but you, who do you say that I am?’ There is no hiding now, no place for anonymity. Every group must have a Simon: someone

who cannot abide the embarrassing silence; someone who will stick his neck out. ‘You are the Christ. You are the Son of the living God.’

One of the most important things to understand about Christianity is that it is not primarily a philosophy or a system of ethics or a religious ideology. It is a relationship to the ‘unsettling’ person of Jesus Christ, to the God-man. *Someone* stands at the centre of Christian concern, Jesus of Nazareth. So it is in that place of interchange that Jesus poses his question.

We’re so accustomed to hearing this question in the gospels that we can lose a sense of its peculiarity. He didn’t ask them what people thought about his teaching, or what impression he was making, or how the crowds were interpreting his actions – reasonable enough questions. He wanted to know what they thought about his identity, his being, and this, Bishop Robert Barron points out in ‘Catholicism’ sets Jesus off from all of the other great religious founders.

Bishop Barron goes on: ‘The Buddha actively discouraged his followers from focusing on his person, urging them instead to walk the spiritual way from which he himself had benefitted. Mohammed was an ordinary man who claimed to have received Allah’s definitive revelation. He would never have dreamt of drawing attention to his own person; rather he wanted to world to read and abide by the Koran, which had been given to him.

Confucius was a moral philosopher, who, with particular acuity, formulated a series of ethical recommendations that constituted a balanced way of being in the world. The structure of his being was never a matter of concern either to him or his followers.

Then there is Jesus. Though he did indeed formulate moral instructions and taught with enormous authority and enthusiasm, Jesus did not draw his followers’ attention primarily to his words. He drew it to himself.

‘Come and see’ he invites early disciples in St John’s Gospel, ‘stay with me’, intimacy with Jesus is what Christ and discipleship is all about. And who is this: The Christ, The anointed of the living God. What a rich name, known only by divine inspiration. Christ means the one anointed with the oil of Chrism. People were anointed unto three great roles of religious leadership. A prophet was anointed as one to reveal God, and God’s

message to people. A priest was anointed to mediate with God for the people; to bring people to God and bring God to people's lives. A king was anointed to represent God's responsibility and care in leading the people. But now for the first time ever, the three religious tasks are found in the one person. 'You are no mere human son of man' says Peter, 'you are the Son of God.'

And YOU have been anointed with Chrism at your baptism and strengthened at confirmation and as a priest at ordination. The words at our baptism, as we are anointed are 'The God of power and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin and brought you to new life through water and the Holy Spirit. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation, so that united with his people, you may remain for ever a member of Christ who is Priest, Prophet and King. Amen.

The Church into which we were baptised gives us this solemnity, the feast day, to keep two of the great pillars of the church: Peter the rock and Paul the builder. These two apostles are the secret of the strength and incredible growth of the Church in its earliest days, and they stand as symbols of the Church's essential nature in any age. Both were great saints, but I often reflect how could we have coped living with them?

The notion we have of saints as perfect, flawless, without weakness of any kind. As I remind you in the newsletter the saints are our brothers and sisters in Christ. Sinners as we are, for no one here is perfect.

Peter: a good man of course, big hearted, enthusiastic, with a great love of the Lord. But also impetuous, hot-headed, inclined to act recklessly. There is no shortage of his blunders in the pages of the gospels, especially his boast at the Last Supper 'even if they all deny you, I never will: yet within a short space of a few hours he denies he ever knew Jesus. He failed abysmally.

Paul: again his greatness is beyond question once he was converted, as is his zeal, his willingness to travel anywhere and endure anything for Christ's sake. But in his letters there's more than a hint that he wasn't always too easy to get on with: by nature he was passionate and fiery; He got a bit touchy when people questioned his status as an apostle or criticised him; he was prepared to upbraid Peter when he felt his behaviour

was inappropriate. He fell out with Barnabas, and as far as we know, never travelled together again.

Peter and Paul: first of all very human beings: but being human is not a drawback to holiness. On the contrary, being true to the nature God has given us is the first essential ingredient in becoming holy.

Today as we honour them, we ought to take to heart the thought that the Lord accepts us and uses us as he did them, just as we are – a funny old mixture of good and the not-so good, of great strength and surprising weaknesses. It seemed to work out for them, even to their martyrdom for Christ. We hope not martyrdom, but all the Lord asks of all of us: faithfulness to him who loves us, ‘warts an’ all.’

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