

SUNDAY 13 SEPTEMBER 2015

(Reading: Mark 8:27-38)

BACKGROUND

The city of Caesarea Philippi was on the southwestern slope of Mount Hermon and the northernmost extent of Jesus' ministry. Here, about 25 miles north-east of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus could be alone with His disciples -- outside the domain of Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, and within the area of Philip the Tetrarch.

Caesarea Philippi is one of the most pleasant sites in Israel -- it is on a terrace 1,150 feet high overlooking a fertile valley. It is also an area scattered with the temples of ancient Syrian Baal worship. Historians have listed at least fourteen such temples -- it was a place beneath the shadow of ancient gods.

There are several references to this area in the Old Testament. The northernmost conquest of Joshua is described as ranging from "the mountains of Israel and its lowlands, from Mount Halak and the ascent to Seir, even as far as Baal Gad in the Valley of Lebanon below Mount Hermon".

A cave near Caesarea Philippi is said to be the birthplace of the Greek god Pan, the god of nature, fields, forests, mountains, flocks and shepherds. The cult of Pan originated in Arcadia, a pastoral region in Greece. Greek travellers, finding the landscape was like their homeland, established this area of worship to Pan. During the Hellenistic period, a sanctuary was built to Pan.

The original name for Caesarea Philippi was Panias (also spelt *Paneas*, *Paneion* and *Paneias*). The modern name is Banias -- an Arabic corruption of *Panias*.

The Jordan river has four main sources, and the cave at Caesarea Philippi is its easternmost source -- this alone would make the area full of emotion for the Jews.

In Caesarea Philippi there was a great temple of white marble built to the godhead of Caesar -- it had been built by Herod the Great.

In 2BC Herod the Great's son, Philip, named it Caesarea in honour of Augustus, and, to differentiate it from Caesarea Maritima, it became known as Caesarea Philippi. Later, Herod Agrippa would call the place Neroneas in honour of the Emperor Nero. Caesarea Philippi was probably destroyed by an earthquake in 363AD. Since 1967 there has been considerable excavation in and around the city -- the shrine of Pan has been cleared, along with the Herodian palace.

With Caesarea Philippi as a backdrop we have a dramatic picture of Jesus of Nazareth, standing on a road in an area littered with the temples of the Syrian gods, a place where the Greek gods looked down, a place where the most important river in Judaism sprang to life, a place where the white marble splendour of the home of Caesar-worship dominated the landscape. And here, of all places, He stands and asks men who they believe Him to be. Peter boldly answers that He is "the Christ."

In Mark there is a clear distinction between the identity of Jesus according to Peter and Jesus Himself. Jesus speaks of Himself as "the Son of Man" while Peter says He is the Christ, or the Messiah. This is not incidental and very intentional. The Messiah was expected by all Jews during this time and being seen as someone who will come with power and reign like David once did. He will overpower the Roman government and take control of the Jewish cause. The "Son of Man" is a title which constitutes suffering and servant hood. It originated in the Old Testament, and was something that Peter and the others did not and could not understand. So Jesus then continued to teach them what will happen to him.

But again it is clear that Peter did not understand. He did not want Jesus to go on the path of suffering and pain. Instead he wants to divert Jesus' path.

And then Jesus also made His following practical. If anyone wants to follow Him, they must take up their cross and follow him. The cross was an instrument of violent and painful execution. To "take the cross" was to carry the horizontal beam of the cross out to the site of execution, generally past a jeering mob. In rhetorically strong terms, Jesus describes what all true disciples must be ready for: if they follow him, they choose a life of sacrifice and suffering too. They might even lose their lives but will

inherit so much more. Each and every one who follows Him and dies will inherit His kingdom that is not made of human hands. His kingdom will last in all eternity.

It is clear that against the backdrop of heathen and Gentile worship, Jesus is telling His followers that they have a choice to make. If they believe in Him, believe that He is the Son of God, their redeemer then they must follow Him with actions of sacrifice and commitment. Yes – He did not come to command and conquer like the Roman emperor or the Jewish kings. He came to serve and die for the sake of others. He did not come to establish an earthly kingdom but a heavenly kingdom.

Amen

SERMON

There is quite a lot in today's reading and I am convinced that it most probably could cover three to four Sundays to preach on all aspects.

But I want to approach the whole reading differently. Instead of looking at individual highlights in the text, I tried to see if I could find a common denominator and preach on that.

It took me the whole week to come to the conclusion that there is ONE, namely that there is a connection between the identity of Jesus and the practical implications thereof. If Jesus is only a teacher like most Jews believe, then they will not have the living hope of His resurrection from death. If Jesus is only a prophet like most Muslims believe, then they will not experience the power of God's forgiveness over sin, death and hell. If Jesus is to you only a good man and not God's Son, then you will not experience His Godly forgiving love.

Faith in who Jesus is always involves action. In fact our actions will expose our answer to the question of who Jesus is to us. It is like the student who was trying to trick the professor with a difficult question. He asked the professor if the bird that he was holding in his hands was dead or alive. If the professor said the bird was dead, the student was obviously going to free the bird and let it fly away. If the professor said it was alive, the student was going to crush the bird. The professor looked at the young man and said, "The answer is in your hands."

I guess the same is true of Jesus' question. It is with our hands or actions that we declare who Jesus is. We know and believe that Jesus was crucified, that He died but was resurrected on the third day. We know that He died for our sins. We know that He ascended to heaven. BUT what do we do with all this knowledge. Do we keep it for ourselves? Do we speak about it with one another? What do we do with our faith?

I think it is time that we start living our faith, each and every moment of every day, not in isolation but in fellowship with others. Others need to see who Jesus is through our actions. If they see that we carry our crosses with joy and humble trust, they will be perplexed. If they hear us speak of the hope of the everlasting Kingdom in the face of great sadness and bereavement, instead of bitterness, they will be shocked. If they see us struggling, hurting and weary but still believing, they will be amazed. The only chance people will ever see our Lord and Saviour is through our actions of love, mercy and forgiveness.

So let us ask it again in the language of our modern day world: How are YOU going to show the world around you that Jesus is the ONLY Lord and Saviour? How are YOU going to show the world that He is God's Son who overpowered death through his love?

May all of us go out and start acting our belief in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ! And let us not allow the world around us to silence our voices and limit our actions!

Amen