

## WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

Today's Gospel event, recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke, is set at Caesarea Philippi, a location some distance north of Galilee and East of last week's Gospel location, the coastal non-Jewish region of Tyre and Sidon. The location, at the base of Mt Hermon, was originally named Paneas and had been given by Caesar Augustus to Herod the Great. However, after AD 4, Herod's "Kingdom" was divided into four by Rome, who took direct control of Judea and left this area to Philip the "Tetrarch", one of Herod's sons (*Tetrarch* means: Ruler of a Quarter). Philip had honoured the new Emperor, Tiberius Augustus, by constructing a small Temple here in his honour, hence the name of the white marble Temple, the *Augusteum*. Philip also named the location after the Emperor and himself and made it his "Capital" city, hence the name: *Caesarea Philippi*. The temple was located right at the mouth of the cave and its Grotto to the fertility god Pan, already considered a sacred site. Probably built in opposition to the Jewish Shrine of Dan, just three miles away, and in Old Testament times the centre of Baal worship, the cave became known as the "Gate of Hades" or the "Gates of the Underworld", because the cult leaders believed that all the fertility gods went down there in the Winter time. Calling for the return of Pan and the fertility gods, the priests of the cult would perform ritual acts before the idol of Pan. These "sacred" rituals involved prostitution, perverse sexual acts between humans and goats and other unnatural sexual acts. The cave was deep and was filled with water, as testified to by the Roman Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, who lived at the time the Gospels were being written and who recorded that no one had ever found the bottom of the water. This water flowed out from under the rock and formed the source of the Jordan River (the "springs of the Jordan River", according to Josephus) which, even to this day, flows south to the Dead Sea. This also suited the cult followers, who assumed that the fertility gods provided the water. After Christ, in Emperor Trajan's time, a second temple was built here, dedicated to Zeus, and its remains can be seen to this day. A Roman coin dated from AD 31 shows the *Augusteum* on one side and the head of the Emperor Augustus on the other.



Against this important backdrop, we can start to understand the context of the "opinion poll" initiated by Jesus, which culminates in Peter's inspired profession of faith on behalf of the Twelve, the founding of the New Israel (*Ecclesia*; *Qahal*) against which the *Gates of the Underworld/Hades/Hell* would/cannot prevail, and the solemn bestowal of the "Keys of the Kingdom".



In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus asks: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" The expression "Son of Man" is a Hebrew idiom, which refers to one's humanity or human ancestry. "The Son of Man" was also a common expression in the prophecies of Christ, especially in the prophet Daniel's vision (*Dan 7*). It is a formal way of asking: "Who do people say that I am?", which is, in fact, what we find in the parallel passage in Mark's Gospel.

The results of the opinion poll are recorded by the Twelve: Some people identify Jesus as John the Baptist; others, Elijah or; others still, Jeremiah or another of the prophets.

But then Jesus narrows the sample and asks the Twelve: "But who do you say that I am?" It is Simon Peter who speaks on behalf of the Twelve (whenever the Twelve are named in the Gospels, he is always named first and is clearly given a leadership role by Christ): "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God".

*Christos* is the Greek form of the Hebrew *Ha mashiach* (הַמְשִׁיחַ, 'the Messiah'), which means "The Anointed One" and is used of Jesus 529 times in the New Testament. The formal renaming of Simon as Peter signifies a change in the relationship, based on a divine election and Peter's inspiration and profession of faith, which Jesus recognizes is from the Father. The English misses the point here though: Christ spoke in Aramaic and would have said: "You are *Kepha* and on this *kepha* I will build my *Qahal*. *Kepha* means Rock. In the Greek of the Gospel, this was recorded by the Evangelist as: "You are *Petrus* (the masculine form of Rock) and on this *Petra* (the word for Rock) I will



build my *Ecclesia*. In English: “You are *Peter* and on this *Rock* I will build my *Church*”.

Peter's faith and he himself is made a foundation stone for the new worshipping assembly, grown organically out of Israel but with a new, universal outreach and value. The new foundation is the result of an inspiration of the Father in the Spirit. It is a response of faith and love to Christ.

Now we can start to understand Jesus' question, *Who do you say that I am*, and why he chose this location.

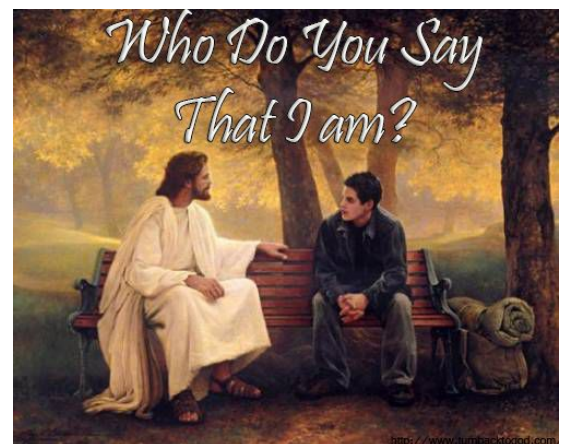
Regarding the location, at least two things come to mind as being of particular significance: firstly, to the pagan mind, which prevailed in the area, the cave and spring water created a “gate to the underworld”. Along with this went perverse and dehumanizing sexual behaviour. Why had Jesus brought his disciples to the “Red Light District” of the world? The disciples must have been shocked and uneasy, as any observant Jew would have avoided this area like it contained the plague. They would have seen it as a city eagerly awaiting at the gates of Hell. Here, more than anywhere, the words of



Jesus would have stood out like a LED beacon on a hilltop, piercing the surrounding darkness and warning of danger. “The Gates of Hell will not prevail against her”. The Church as the New Israel built up on faith, infused as a gift to those receiving and that they may receive the divine revelation in Christ, is and will be protected. That perverse belief and dehumanizing sexual behaviour belongs at the gates of the underworld only serves to highlight the new and dynamic opening to the Kingdom of Heaven, which is through the Crucified and Risen Body of Christ. If Peter receives the keys, which affords the divinely given authority to open and to close, the portal itself is Christ, “The Gate of the Sheepfold”, who as Prophet guides us to the portal, who as King overcomes evil obstacles along the way, and who as High Priest of the New and Eternal Covenant, has

offered the one reconciling Sacrifice of himself and mediates/intercedes eternally for the Church on her Pilgrim journey. This leads us to the second salient aspect of the geographical significance of this Gospel dialogue. It is here and in this region of the Tetrarchy of Philip, perhaps more than in any other place in Israel, that the claims of the Emperor himself come into full conflict with the divinity of Christ. It was the claim of the Emperor that he was divine, divinely descended from the gods, and he assumed the titles of *Son of God*, *Anointed One* and *Summus Pontifex/Pontifex Maximus* (High Priest). It is over against the Emperor's titles and in this peculiar location of Caesarea Philippi, named after two worldly rulers, that Peter is inspired to proclaim Jesus as the *Christ* (Anointed), the *Son of the Living God*. Perhaps it is because Jesus' ministry was so opposed by the Jewish High Priesthood that he did not explicitly appropriate the title of Priest. Nor do any of the evangelists explicitly designate Christ as priest. It would only be with time and reflection that later, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews would call Christ *Summus Pontifex/Sacerdos*, indeed the true High Priest of the New, Eternal Covenant.

But Jesus' question to the disciples is also meant for us today. *Who do you say that I am?* It is a question that is meant to disturb us, perhaps as it disturbed the Twelve who apparently did not know how to answer. For it is only in the power and grace of the Spirit that we too can make, with Peter and the Twelve, the profession of faith: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. This response has lost none of its original relevance. Indeed our faith is as relevant as ever, even if it requires purification and ongoing reform, both at the level of the individual and of the Church as a whole. Surely that is happening in the contemporary clash of Gates and Keys. Surely, the gates of the underworld will not prevail over the Gate of the Sheepfold. Surely we must remain in Christ by faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit. After all, is there really anywhere else to turn or anyone else to turn to? The positive value of atheism is to make salient the choice that it is either to God or to the Self. If to the self, then let modern, immanentist secular humanism be its own judge. Are we any happier for appropriating divinity to the self? The prevalence of mental illness in the immanentist, secularized communities of the West today do not support a positive response. As psychotic episodes became increasingly prevalent among the Emperors as well as Herod and his sons, and as the empire decayed, even while the persecuted Way flourished, history suggests that the Gates of the underworld do indeed prevail against those who dwell at her gates.



In the midst of social upheaval, the words of Peter come to mind, at the disquieting conclusion to the Eucharistic chapter of John's Gospel: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life, and we believe”.