

Homily for Trinity - Who do you say that I am?

St Peter's 'confession,' as today's Gospel is often called, is recounted in each of the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke. There would be few portions of the gospel that have been more subjected to scrutiny, argument and controversy than what we have heard today. Many books have been written about the meaning of Peter's confession and the meaning of our Lord's reply to Peter... "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of heaven and whatever you bind on earth will remain bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will remain loosed in heaven."

Obviously, in a ten minute homily, it is quite impossible to go into even a fraction of all of that. However every faithful preacher is bidden, every time we rise to proclaim God's Word to the faithful, to bring the Scriptures to life and proclaim the Catholic faith - nothing more and nothing less. And so I humbly call on God right now to help me in this task today.

One aspect of this portion of the Gospel is often overlooked and that is its setting... "*Jesus came into the districts of Caesarea Philippi*". This district lies about 40km north of the Sea of Galilee. The population of this region was mainly non-Jewish in our Lord's time. Nevertheless there could have been few districts with more religious associations than Caesarea Philippi. The area was scattered with temples to Baal the ancient god of the Syrian people. At least 14 of these temples round Caesarea Philippi, though ruined, survived well into the nineteenth century.

Right beside the city of Caesarea Philippi there rose a great crag within which there was a deep cavern which was said to be the birthplace of the Greek god Pan, the god of nature. The name of the district was Panais and still, today, it is called Banais. The legends of the Greek gods gathered around Caesarea Philippi.

As well, that great cavern was said to be the source of the River Jordan. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus wrote.. "under the cavern arise the springs of the River Jordan." Now the River Jordan, as we know, is absolutely critical to the faith and identity of Israel. Crossing the Jordan meant entry to the Promised Land, something central to the story of the deliverance of God's chosen people from Bondage in Egypt.

There was one more great and impressive temple in Caesarea Philippi, a huge structure built of white marble by Herod the Great (the Herod of the story of the slaughter of the Children of Bethlehem). The temple was dedicated to the worship of the Roman Emperor as a god. It was Herod's son Philip who had changed the name of the region from Panais to

Caesarea Philippi and he had further adorned this impressive pile of marble that idolised the Roman Empire. The Herod's knew from whom their power arose. In our Lord's day this centre of idolatry directed to the Roman Emperor was at its zenith.

Here is, then a dramatic picture... By this time the orthodox Jewish world is plotting to destroy Jesus as a heretic. He stands in place littered with the temples of the Syrian gods; a place where the ancient Greek gods looked down from the mountain home of Pan; a place where the history of Israel crowded into the minds of faithful Jews and a place where the splendour of Caesar worship and the power of the Roman Empire was so visibly present. In this dramatic setting, Jesus, the homeless, penniless, Galilean carpenter, with twelve very ordinary men around him asked them two critical questions... "*who do people say that I am?*" and "*who do you say that I am?*"

It is as if Jesus deliberately set himself against the background of the world's religions and demanded to be compared with them and to have the verdict in his favour! There are few scenes in the gospels where our Lord's consciousness of his own divinity shines out with a more dazzling light.

The answer given by the Apostles to the first question speaks of the Jewish expectations of the promised messiah. There were many Jews who hoped that John the Baptist was the Messiah and they maintained that hope in a belief that he would come back from the dead and lead a glorious revolution. Jewish expectation of the longed for messiah included the return of the greatest of all the prophets - Elijah - who would announce that the day of deliverance had finally come. Another strong thread of Jewish belief understood that the prophet Jeremiah would return as a herald and forerunner of the coming Messiah. (You can read about this in I Maccabees 15: 1-14).

Identifying Jesus as John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah was paying him a very great compliment indeed, let that be quite clear but these answers fell far, far short of the truth. Jesus was not another promised forerunner of the Messiah, the Anointed one of God, and so he asks the Apostles the direct and inescapable question... "*And you... who do you say I am?*"

Peter's great answer to our Lord's question .. '*Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God*' is one of THE greatest moments of Divine Revelation in the entire New Testament. Somebody (Peter) understood the truth about the person of Jesus who is called the Christ and proclaimed it in one simple sentence. He is the Son of God!

Essentially, Peter was saying that human categories are inadequate to describe Jesus Christ. Jews of our Lord's time believed that the voice of prophecy had been silent for 400

years. Likening Jesus to the greatest of the prophets was saying that the voice of God was once again being clearly heard. That is an enormous compliment indeed, but for Peter it was not enough. It was just so inadequate because Jesus is so much more than a prophet – even the greatest of them! Human categories like Prophet, Teacher, Ruler, King and so forth are all much less than the truth. Peter was certain that no merely human category could adequately describe Jesus because Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God.

Peter, with the direct inspiration of God the Father, made a personal and profound discovery and gave us a succinct affirmation of the truth about Jesus. He is the Son of the Father.

Dear Faithful people, every single day, in all sorts of ways, Jesus asks you and me...
And you... who do you say I am?

At this and every Mass we are invited to affirm Peter's confession of faith. When we recite the Nicene Creed and we humbly kneel at the words "*and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary and was made Man*" - we are affirming that Jesus is the incarnate Son of the living God. When the sacred Host and the Chalice are raised for our adoration after the words of institution and we say... '*my Lord and my God*' - we are affirming Peter's confession of faith.

Whenever I make the sign of the cross I am affirming that Jesus, the son of the living God, gave up his life for my salvation on Calvary.

Whenever I set aside time for prayer and for reading the scriptures I am affirming that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God.

Whenever I acknowledge to anyone – family, friends, work colleagues etc that I am a Christian; that I believe Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God and all my hope is founded on the saving power of his crucifixion and resurrection.. I am joining Peter in his great confession of faith.

Whenever I conform my life to the precepts of the Ten Commandments and the clear teachings of Jesus Christ and His church, I am joining Peter in his confession of faith and saying... '*thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.*'

The Christian Faith does not consist in knowing *about* Jesus; it always consists in *knowing* Jesus. Jesus asks of us the same personal response that Peter gave when he says... "*You – who do you say that I am?*" May our answer ever be given with growing sincerity, with singleness of heart and in both word and deed ... '*Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.*'