

Homily for August 23rd at Saint Lawrence

Much has happened in the gospel since our reading last week. From Tyre and Sidon, Our Lord returned to Galilee and performed other miracles. Today we read that He goes north – to Caesarea Philippi.

When I was blessed to go to the Holy land, our group went to the remains of Caesarea Philippi. It was a place where some of the source waters for the Jordan River come from. The name JORDAN means “descending from Dan.” This area is where the tribe of Dan settled, and the river flows south from Dan.

Caesarea Philippi had many Roman temples, and was situated under a large cliff – a tremendous ROCK.

Today’s reading is part one of a passage that concludes next week. This week Peter says all the right things. Next week, we find out he still has a lot to learn.

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Jesus asks a question: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

Sometimes in the Old Testament, ‘son of man’ was a way to say “human,” or “mortal.” In the latter books of the Old Testament, the title “Son of Man” was given to a figure who was to come; sort of angelic, sort of messianic, who is the agent of divine judgment and salvation. Jesus used the title ‘Son of Man’ for Himself.

After the disciples reply, Jesus changes the question to be more immediate and personal, “Who do YOU say that I am?”

It is now a question of who they proclaim Jesus to be. It is now what their conclusion is after walking with Him for this long.

Earlier this week when I was with four other priests, knowing this gospel reading was coming up, I asked them, “Who do you say Jesus is?” One of them, who has a large Latino population in his parish, replied immediately, “Jesus coordinates and schedules all my Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist.”

Which was funny, but did not help me prepare my homily.

Certainly this is the perennial question we are asked on this Sunday. Who do I say that Jesus is? There may be many answers I give at a particular time; be it friend, guide, example, Lord, God, shepherd, or teacher. Are my theological answers to the question worthy of Him? How can I grow in my understanding of Him? How can I grow in my courage to proclaim Him? How do I explain Jesus to other people?

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It is Peter who answers Our Lord's question. Peter throughout the gospels is presented as the first of the Disciples. Peter says the words we have been waiting for the disciples to say loudly and clearly, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

He is the Messiah, the long-awaited anointed one. He is more than that – He has a special relationship to the One God – He can be called "Son of God" in a way more complete than the rest of Israel can.

That does not mean Peter has everything figured out. But it is a proclamation so correct and so profound that Our Lord approves it as something that could only have been revealed to Peter by Jesus' heavenly Father.

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Our Lord then gives Peter a particular responsibility, a particular position. There are several points to this.

First: He gives Peter the name Peter. Up until now Matthew has been calling Him Peter – that is the name every one of the readers and hearers of the gospel would have known him by. But here we get the fuller story. His name was Simon Bar Jonah, which means Simon Son of Jonah. Here Jesus gives him a new name – Rock, which in Aramaic was Cephas and in Greek was Peter. Throughout the Old Testament, and still in cultures today – being given a name defined something of the person. And being given a new name was to be given a new identity. Peter now has a responsibility to Jesus for the others.

Standing under the shadow of the tremendous rocky face of the cliff at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus declares that Peter was the real ROCK, he was now to be the firm foundation for the others.

Jesus has given us all a new name – His name. We are baptized into Christ with the Divine Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We now bear the name ‘Christian.’ We have a new life, a new role and responsibility with the world and with other Christians. We now have a special relationship with God.

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Christ then says other things that define Peter’s role. He says He will build His church on this rock. Peter has a foundational role.

Christ says the Church will withstand the gates of the netherworld. Christ’s Church will endure.

Christ gives Peter the keys to the kingdom. This is an Old Testament image. An example of which is in our first reading from Isaiah. The second-in-command was a steward who was given keys to lock and unlock. Such a person was to act with the authority of their master. The role of Peter in the first generations of the Church was seen as that of a steward, whose role continues and will be handed on until the Second Coming.

Christ gives Peter the power to bind and loose. Binding and loosing is a term given to the Jewish religious leaders of the day. Their judgements were considered authoritative. Christ gives a heavenly authority to Peter.

The Pope, the successor to Peter, still has a role as unifier and guide. He is needed. We pray for him that He will walk close to Christ so that he can lead us closer to Christ.

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Our gospel passage ends with the words that Jesus “strictly ordered” them to tell no one He was the Christ. After His death and resurrection, they will then tell the world. We will hear more about this next week.

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We are called to tell the world that Jesus is the Christ. Through the Sacraments of His death and resurrection, we are prepared. Not that we couldn’t use more preparation, but that comes from us doing what the first disciples did – continue to walk with Jesus. Because we know who He is, we can freely show how much we

need Our Savior. We can explain and demonstrate what it means that the world needed a Christ back then, and that the world needs the Christ today as much as ever.

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