

# *‘who do you say that I am?’*

a sermon preached on the  
*twelfth sunday after pentecost*

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at

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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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The lections: Isaiah 51: 1-6; Psalm 138; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16: 13-20

The scene between Jesus and his disciples in today’s Gospel has been described as the turning point in St Matthew’s Gospel – the point where the hostility of the religious leadership forces Jesus to turn away from them and to focus on his disciples.<sup>1</sup> From then on, he concentrates on forming them into the nucleus of a new people of God, later to be called ‘the Church’.<sup>2</sup> Here in this scene we hear Jesus name St Peter as the rock on which he will build his church, in response to Peter’s recognition of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. A clear turning point indeed.

The setting for this scene is itself highly significant. It takes place near Caesarea Philippi, 40 kilometres north of the Sea of Galilee, at the base of Mt. Hermon. This area is now virtually uninhabited, a nature reserve and an archaeological site, but in Jesus’ time it was a Roman city, as its name at that stage suggests: Caesarea in honour of the Roman emperor, and Philippi because the area came under the rule of Herod the Great’s son Philip.

It is the location of one of the largest springs feeding the Jordan River, and this abundant fertility made the site very attractive for religious worship from earliest times. The spring emerges from a large cave, which became sacred to the Greek god Pan, and the centre of the worship there. From the time of Greek settlement into the period of Roman occupation, many temples to Pan and various other gods were built there. It was renowned as the centre of the worship of foreign gods. The city was originally named Panias in Pan’s honour; today it has reverted to Banias, the Arabic form. Next to Pan’s cave, in the vast rocky escarpment that dominates the area, you can still see a series of hewn niches that once held statues of the pagan gods .

So imagine that critical conversation between Jesus and his disciples in that setting. There they were, a small band of wandering Jewish people – subjugated people under Roman occupation – in what would have been a bustling, cosmopolitan, Roman city, bearing the name of the Roman Caesar. A place awash with pagan temples, and statues of a vast array of gods, in an area that for centuries had been devoted to worship of a pagan god. And here, in this alien place, and against all the odds, the leader of this small Jewish band is recognised by his followers as the Son of the living God, no less!

Today, as I said, Caesarea Philippi – Banias – is a shadow of its old self, an archaeological site, and a tourist destination. Its pagan worship and its old gods are no more. And we are here, 2000 years later and half a world away, worshipping this Jesus, the Son of the living God, members of the Church against whom, Jesus promised, the gates of Hades itself would not prevail.

And yet... are we committed Christians now reduced to a small band of outsiders in a society rather like Caesarea Philippi in its hey day? We have seen the recent Census statistics. Church going rates have been plummeting for decades, but now, for the first time, ‘no

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<sup>1</sup> Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew’s Gospel in the Church Today*, Sydney: St Pauls Publications, 2004, p.127

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

religion' has supplanted the next highest category – the Roman Catholic church – to top the religion section in the Census results. Though that term – 'no religion' – is actually deceptive. Our secular society has its own religions, not listed in the statistical charts. In our bustling, cosmopolitan culture, the gods of hedonism and consumerism, materialism and individualism are worshipped, together with the relentless acquisition of more and more wealth, not to mention atheism. The one we know as the Son of the living God is as strange to most of the people out there in the Camberwell shops and Sunday market this morning as he would have been to the inhabitants of Caesarea Philippi in today's Gospel.

And the churches – all of them – are increasingly anxious. They feel threatened by this Caesarea Philippi in which we live. They no longer have the influence they once had in Australian society, an influence they long to regain, if they are honest. Politicians politely ignore church leaders, the media dismisses them as irrelevant unless the story is salacious, and the general population just doesn't know who they are any more.

After all, most people rarely have anything to do with the Church any more, now that weddings are more often held in gardens, and funerals in community centres, than in churches. Christendom – the status quo for thousands of years when the churches and western society were closely integrated – is now well and truly relegated to history. The Church is now as separate from society as it was in the first few centuries of the Christian era. And many Christians find that very disturbing.

We fear that the Church these days is not really rock-solid, as Jesus promised when, in the face of the sheer rock escarpments of Caesarea Philippi, he playfully gave his disciple Simon the new name of 'Peter', meaning rock – the rock on which he would build his church.

That conversation between Jesus and his disciples is just as critical for us today as it was for those gathered around him at Caesarea Philippi. And central to it was his probing question: 'Who do you say that I am?' Their answer was life-changing for them, and it is for us.

Immediately after that scene at Caesarea Philippi, in the verses that follow on from today's Gospel reading, Jesus made it very plain what accepting him as the Messiah – God's anointed – and as the Son of the living God might mean. "From that time on", we are told, "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised".<sup>3</sup> And the same path of pain and suffering might await his followers: "If any want to become my followers, (he said), let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Uncompromising words!

In our Caesarea Philippi, amidst its alien gods, answering Jesus' question – "who do you say that I am" – is not easy. To declare him to be God's anointed, God's Son, is confronting. Taking up our cross and following him commits us to a difficult, potentially painful path. It is not for the faint-hearted.

But despite current appearances to the contrary, the Church is rock-solid. It may look very different to what we used to know, and might no longer be an institution our society wants to recognise. But it is God's church, and ultimately evil will not prevail against it. As our prayer card says, "The light shines in the darkness; and the darkness did not overcome it."<sup>4</sup>

And there is food for our journey. In the Eucharist we are called back again and again to Jesus, the Son of the living God, who gives us his very self, broken and bleeding, for our nourishment. It is where we, his broken, fearful followers, are given the strength for whatever difficult path lies ahead, the assurance that our Lord is our loving companion on the road, and the promise of Resurrection.

Who do *you* say that Jesus is?

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 16: 21, 24, 25.

<sup>4</sup> John 1:5