

23 August 2020

Exodus 1:8-2:10
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:13-20

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

We humans are beings located in earth and space and time; we are not disembodied spirits or souls; we have bodies as well as minds; we occupy places and can move about from place to place. And this brings us into contact with the things, people, histories, and cultures of those places. Our thoughts, beliefs, ideas are shaped in relationship to our bodily existence in time and place; they do not come about in isolation. Context matters.

When we read the Bible and see mention of dates and places, the passage of time, and movement from place to place, we do well to pay attention. These things are not incidentals. For one thing these references emphasise the Incarnation: that Jesus was God in human flesh, dwelling in the realm of earth and space and time. But they also matter because events happen within a context. We do well to inquire into what these contexts were like, because these may inform us about what is going on and what it means.

Jesus and his disciples have been on the road, and they come to a place called Caesarea Philippi.¹

Situated about 25 to 30 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, Caesarea Philippi was near a trade route that connected Tyre in the west to Damascus in the northeast. A nearby cave housed a great spring that fed one of the sources of the Jordan River. The cave and spring had long served as a sanctuary dedicated to the Greek god, Pan. Greek inscriptions and niches carved into the rock, still visible today, suggest dedications to other pagan gods as well.

In addition to the polytheism represented at the site, signs of power and authority were on display as well. A couple of decades before Jesus’ birth, Herod the Great had built a temple near the spring in honour of Caesar Augustus. By the time Jesus

¹ The following information about Caesarea Philippi is from West, with minor adaption.

and his disciples visited the region, Caesarea Philippi had been given over to the auspices of Herod's son, Philip the tetrarch, who established the city as the administrative centre of his government.

So this is a place that represents the intersection of economic trade, diverse religious claims, and the power of the Empire and its vassals.

It is therefore a deeply significant place for Jesus to ask his question – “Who do people say that I am?” It is a question not simply about Jesus' identity, as if getting the titles right would earn somebody an “A” on a messianic quiz. It is a question about allegiance.

In what or in whom will the followers of Jesus place their trust? Will it be in the privileges deriving from access to opportunity and wealth? In the worship of a prevailing culture's latest idols? In allegiance to the dominant power of earthly rulers?²

Simon Peter's declaration, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God”, is a profound – and potentially dangerous – thing to assert in that context. “Messiah”, or its Greek equivalent “Christ”, has become to us something like Jesus' second name so that we fail to hear its profound meaning. In brief summary, Peter's declaration is that Jesus is world's true King – and Peter makes this bold declaration in a place dedicated to other rulers. If the local citizens and authorities were to hear this declaration and understand it, then who knows what would happen! It is a profoundly countercultural thing to say.

Paul wrote a letter to the church in Rome. Again, context matters. He is writing to a Christian community that comprises both Jews and Gentiles, formerly deeply divided from each other. He is writing to a Christian community living under the Roman empire and its political ideologies. He is writing to a Christian community living within a culture in thrall to Greek philosophies that regard the body as the lesser, or even bad, part of the human being, and the mind and soul as the greater and good. He is writing to a culture in which status matters.

² West

And he tells them “Do not conform to the pattern of this world”. Paul tells them, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Rather than denying the worth of their bodies, he tells them, “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God”. Contrary to division between peoples and contrary to the value placed on status, he addresses them equally as “my brothers”, and urges them “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought”

We are called to be Jesus people first, above everything else. And that means that we are urged to evaluate the culture in which we live as to how far it serves the purposes of God and accords with God’s ways, and to challenge its values and habits where it does not. We will therefore often find ourselves being asked to be counter-cultural.

Jesus said to Simon, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”

There is a great deal of scholarly debate about what exactly was the “rock” on which Jesus was to build his church: Was it Peter himself? Was it Peter’s faith? Was it in fact Jesus? Importantly, for today, I just want to note that what Jesus was to build on whatever it was was *his church*. And, of course, it is obvious to note that he wasn’t talking about a building. Our English word “church” comes originally from a Greek phrase for the “Lord’s house”, but we use the word to stand, not just for a building, but also for a people. And indeed this double meaning makes sense when we recall that Paul, for example, went on to describe the people of Christ using the metaphor of a building, the temple.

But when Jesus says he is going to build his church, he uses a different Greek word, which occurs frequently in the Bible, “ecclesia”. Ecclesia means a people called together, an assembly.

And whether we look at the shaky character of Peter himself or consider the, at times, shallow commitment of his faith, we have to be astonished that God would

ever entrust the advancement of his kingdom purposes to the fragile, risky means of the flawed people he calls out and calls together.

So God has to do something with us to make us able to be his people. This is what we might call *discipleship*.

If we were to read Mark's account of Peter's confession of faith, we would find that it is a little different to Matthew's account. In Matthew Peter's confession arises when Jesus asks his question, just once, in the particular location of Caesarea Philippi. In Mark, Jesus was *asking* the question, repeatedly it seems, as they went *on the way*, journeying into the villages near Caesarea Philippi. Mark frequently uses the expression *the way* as shorthand for the journey of discipleship.³

When Paul talks of the renewing of the mind, he is talking about the lifelong journey of discipleship, of becoming transformed increasingly into the image of Christ. The 6th of August, just a few weeks ago, is kept as the Feast of the Transfiguration of the Beloved Son; and coincidentally the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus is found almost immediately after today's reading. The three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) all record that the Transfiguration occurred within 6-8 days of Peter's dramatic confession. Matthew writes that on the high mountain Jesus was "transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light". It is a shame that the creation of a special technical word can sometimes obscure our understanding. When we read in the gospels that Jesus was "transfigured", the Greek word used is in fact the same one that Paul uses in relation to Jesus' followers, to *us*, in Romans 12. It is the same word Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 3 when he writes, "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory". Discipleship, the journey of faith, involves becoming more and more like Christ.

³ West

There is much that can be said about how we undergo this transformation – and in many ways it must be *lived* rather than merely talked about – but today I just want to talk about the importance of immersing ourselves in, and allowing ourselves to be shaped by, the biblical story, and the importance of sharing the discipleship journey with others.

Paul says, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” In Isaiah 55, God says “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” The issue of course is how we go about training ourselves to the Lord’s thoughts. Scripture is the primary means by which we learn the Lord’s thoughts.

Today’s Old Testament reading launches us into the story of Moses, and over the following weeks we’ll cover the sweep of the long narrative of the rescue of the Israelites from oppression in Egypt, their forty years in the Sinai wilderness, the giving of the Law, and their coming at last into the Promised Land. They entered the Promised Land a distinctive people with a story that marked them out as the people of God, a holy people, a people set apart.

Our problem for the Church today is that we are not an already distinctive people colonising a foreign land and needing to maintain our togetherness and distinctiveness. Instead we face a struggle to *become* the distinctive people of God, formed from within the culture in which we are deeply immersed because most of us have been brought up in it.

This is where our reading of the Bible becomes so vital for us as a community. The Bible contains the story that makes us the people of God.

The Bible is the story that forms us as the distinctive people of God. It is God’s story; it is our story. As we immerse ourselves in it day by day, week by week, it changes us if we do so with openness.

The demise of communism in Czechoslovakia in the late 1980s provides an image of how this might work. “... [A]verage citizens did some very ordinary, practical, normal

things that resulted in the transformation of that country at the end of the Cold War. These ordinary people were factory workers, artists, teachers – men and women from all forms of life who felt they were caught in a system that would never change and from which they could never escape. They had no part of power blocs or elites but gradually developed habits that formed this parallel culture in the midst of the dominant Communist government. What happened was unexpected and unplanned. There was no grand strategy; rather, people began doing simple things that changed their reality. In coffee shops and other meeting places, a few would bring short original poems or commentaries and share them with others. These were not political tracts but personal statements about their experiences under communism. [Some told stories of another reality: for example, some people wrote of children trusting their parents in the midst of a public culture that encouraged children to spy on their parents and report on their activities.] They were not intended to change the political or social situation but merely to articulate inner convictions. Mostly, these texts made it clear that the writers did not believe in communism anymore. Their compositions were passed around; others read them and wrote their own pieces or created music. Again, none of this was a planned strategy but became habit or practice among people. This was the slow, gradual creation of a parallel culture in which more and more people found ways of confessing that they didn't believe in communism anymore. ... [W]hen enough people entered this parallel culture, communism could not be sustained and collapsed from within."⁴

So we immerse ourselves in the Bible, *our* story; we allow it to read us; and we share with one another both this big story and also our individual stories of how we find ourselves in this story and how it is changing us. As we do so, God is creating in us a parallel culture, counter to the narratives of the world that would keep us from the liberty we find under the true King, Jesus the Messiah, the Son of the living God

⁴ Roxburgh, p.144 (The sentence enclosed in square brackets is also sourced from same page, but has been here interpolated into the larger quote.)

Sources

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