

Being a Foundation Stone or Stumbling Stone

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Matthew 16 v 13 -23

Today's story about Jesus and his disciples appears in all three gospels, but Mark and Luke give us a little more background. Mark says that Jesus and his disciples went away for some time out, by going to the northern-most area of Israel called Caesarea Philippi just below Mt Hermon and the Syrian border. This area had a mainly non-Jewish population and being more remote, made it a good location for some team training with his disciples.

Jesus knew that his time was coming to an end. Verse 21 says, "From this time on Jesus began to say plainly to his disciples, "I must go to Jerusalem and suffer much....I will be put to death, but three days later I will be raised to life."

Jesus was concerned as to whether the disciples had caught on to who he was and what he was on about; would they be able to continue his mission when he had returned to his Heavenly Father. Jesus asked a key question: 'Who do people/ who do you say that I am?'

Ever since Jesus was raised to life after his death, his has become the central question of life for every person who hears the Christian message. Our eternal future depends on our answer.

I've always loved this story about Jesus from when I first read about the place where he it happened, because it is a place of special significance. It was not in Nazareth, Capernaum, or Jerusalem, but was in one of the most diverse religious areas of Israel. It was significant for several reasons and during my trip to Israel last year, I was determined to go there and I took these photos which are on the screen. The place was called Caesarea Philippi in Jesus day and is called Banias today.

In this immediate area, there were in Jesus' day at least 14 temples for Syrian Baal Worship, the worship of the gods of agriculture and fertility. Syria was and still is the large nation to the north of Israel.

This hillside was an important centre for the worship of Greek gods. In this hillside was a very deep cavern and it's depth could never be measured. It was believed to be the birthplace of the chief Greek god named Pan, the God of nature. The original name of this place was Panias (today called Banias, the Hebrew version of the name). The whole hillside still has the recesses and niches for statues of the Greek gods, and the remains of shrines built on the ground in front of the cliff for the worship of these gods.

Also under this hill, in the great underground cavern, is one of the sources of the Jordan River, one of three springs where water comes above ground and forms the Jordan. The River Jordan is of crucial importance for Israel's life, which is a dry and barren land without irrigation. It only rains there for the equivalent of three weeks per year. Today Israel faces a crisis because the land is very productive but the levels of the Jordan River, the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea are all dropping. So this area held a special reminder of Jewish faith.

Finally a magnificent white marble temple was built there by Herod the Great, for the worship of the Roman Caesar (who was known as a god), although Caesar worship developed more intensely after Jesus' day. This was a huge challenge to Christians who were asked to declare that 'Caesar is Lord' when Jesus alone was their Lord. (Caesarea means 'Caesar's town'.)

It was against this backdrop of the current world religions and powers, that this homeless, penniless carpenter from Galilee asks twelve ordinary men to compare him with these other religions of his day by asking, "Who do people say that I am?'

If Jesus were living in New Zealand today, I wonder against what kind of backdrop he would ask that question? What are the dominant popular gods or religious systems of our day? Would Jesus stand against the background of: the Sky Tower Casino, Eden Park, the America's Cup Village, Auckland University, K-Road or Microsoft headquarters? (notice they are all in Auckland, that place of many gods in the north!)

Or, would it be a more down to earth backdrop on a Saturday evening in the rugby/netball club rooms at 8pm, when the country stands still to watch the Lotto balls shoot the gap? hoping and praying we will instantly win a fortune which we haven't earned and do not deserve.

Or maybe, against the background of our own 'home and castle'; in the comfort of our own home and property, which we are always upgrading and developing; and sitting with our own family which we can very easily become our highest priority, and watching, 'What we do on Wednesdays', hoping for a windfall from Telebingo.

Money, knowledge, fame, comfort and family; are these the gods of our age?

An unhealthy focus on these things and hoping that they will bring success, protection, wealth and help in our lives, will have the same role as worshipping the gods of Jesus' day. Anything which becomes a consuming goal or ambition can become our god. I read in a newspaper last year that NZ teenagers did not want to take up apprenticeships because they wanted to be in a media-selected pop group like 'True Bliss' or play in a Super 12 rugby team!

But seeking to challenge the gods of his age, Jesus asks, 'Who do people say that I am?'

Just before the parallel passage in Luke's gospel we hear that Jewish King Herod is also confused about who Jesus is. Herod has just killed John the Baptist and now John seems to have popped up again in another form. This is what some were saying. Others said that he was the great prophet Elijah or one of the other prophets, come back to life. The Jewish Bible stated that one day Elijah would return to prepare the way for the End of world and the coming Messiah, who would establish God's kingdom (according to Malachi 4 verse 5). Even to this day on their Passover celebration, every Jewish home leaves an empty chair for Elijah. Many people of his day saw Jesus as this forerunner to the Messiah.

When he had heard the opinions of the people, Jesus asked his disciples the crucial question: 'Who do YOU say that I am?'

This was a critical time in Jesus' life and mission. He knew that the end was approaching for him as I said earlier. Verse 21 says, "From that time on Jesus began to talk plainly about his suffering and death...." He could see the writing on the wall and knew the Jewish leaders were plotting against him. It was critical that the disciples understood who he was and why he had come because he would not be with them much longer. He needed to intensify his teaching programme but first he needed to know if these twelve close followers had caught on. Had they gained insight; had the lights come on about who he was?

Notice that Jesus didn't ask, "What is my mission statement? What are my Kingdom objectives? my fundamental beliefs, my strategic plans?" He doesn't give them a written or oral exam.

Jesus asks the central question of Christian faith. "Who do YOU think that I am?"

Jesus Christ is more central to Christian Faith, than any other founder is to their religion.

This is because Christian Faith is not essentially about holding certain beliefs or behaving in certain ways or obeying particular laws or belonging to a particular group. First and foremost, Christianity is about having an active relationship with Jesus Christ, and our future, our eternal future in this life and beyond, depends upon how we answer this key question, Who do you say that Jesus Christ is? This is the most important life question for every person to consider and today, four people are giving us their answer. They are choosing to publicly express their faith and trust in Jesus Christ, in the midst of all the competing gods of this age. What a great day for them and us!

Jesus must have been delighted by Peter's response, "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God". Peter was saying, 'You are God's special agent, the chosen representative of God himself who has come into our world; even more than that, you are the son, the closest relation of the Living God.' I love to use this adjective 'Living' God, as it conveys an active, dynamic, present-with-us God who is alive and well and working in our world. Maybe Peter used the term deliberately against the backdrop of the lifeless, inert, dead idols, which were sitting like stunned mullets in the nooks and crannies of the cliff face.

Jesus tells Peter that this was a huge spiritual insight, revealed directly to him by God. None of us can ever finally convince someone else to believe and to put their trust in Jesus Christ. We can teach and persuade them about the evidence but they must make a personal discovery for themselves, with the help of God's Spirit. Christian life begins and is centred upon acknowledging who Jesus is but we also need to develop a right understanding about Jesus. Only minutes later, Jesus has to put Peter straight (verse 23). In a painful statement, Jesus has to tell Peter, whom he loved dearly, that he has misunderstood what it means for Jesus to be God's Messiah. That suffering and death were part of God's purpose for Jesus to be Saviour of the world, the forgiver of the sins of all people, so that the broken relationship between God and his people can be renewed.

One moment Peter shows great insight, "You are the Christ...", and Jesus calls Peter a Rock. Not the whole basis of the church but the first stone in the foundation on which the Church will be built; the first person to recognise who Jesus was, the first stone in the foundation of the building to which countless others will be added. Then a few moments later, Peter is called an obstacle, a stumbling block, and a rock to trip upon.

My most surprising experience in Israel was to discover how rocky and stony the land is. Everywhere we looked were stones littering the countryside. I saw why their form of capital punishment was stoning. Every building, fence, street and wall seemed to be made out of stones and rocks. This is why the archaeological sites are so well preserved. They are built out of stones, and in some places 20 different layers of separate habitations are found built upon one other, dating back 2000, 4000, even 6000 years!

Today in their testimonies, we have heard how other people, parents, family and friends, have been foundation stones in these people's lives.

This is a challenge for each of us who are Christians here today.

Are we being foundation stones or stumbling blocks, in the lives of others? Are we a solid reliable foundation upon which their faith can grow and develop? Is our own relationship with Jesus close and growing, so that our understanding and behaviour will help point others clearly to Jesus? Could Jesus say about you and me today - on this rock I can build others into my church? If Jesus said to you, "Who do you **SHOW** that I am?", do we give a clear picture of Jesus? Someone once asked a searching question, "If being a Christian was a crime in NZ, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

Read Mark ch 8 vv 34 to 38.

In Mark's version of this story, Jesus went on to say, "If you are ashamed of me and my teachings in this godless and wicked day", then he would be ashamed of them when he came in all his glory with his angels at the end of the world. Most people want to go to heaven when they die, but most don't want to follow Jesus in this life. Getting to heaven is not about what you know but who you know; not what you do but trusting in what Jesus has done for you. The key question each of us must decide upon BEFORE WE DIE (and none of us know when that will be) is 'Who is Jesus to me?' If you haven't decided that for yourself yet, we'd like to offer you this booklet called 'Why Jesus?' & I'd be happy to speak with you any time about it.

But for now, we will get on with the baptisms of these four people who have said 'yes' to Jesus and are not ashamed to acknowledge him.