

## **Proper 16, Pentecost XV**

### **August 24, 2008**

From time to time, when something really important was going on, Jesus would take great care to set the stage, to insure that the location and the circumstances of an event gave context and clarity to what was happening. It was his version of the 'street theater' invented by the earlier prophets. The triumphal entry into Jerusalem is a very good example of this. So is today's Gospel.

Jesus seems to have taken the disciples to Caesarea Philippi for the specific purpose of asking them that single question. The place itself gave added force and deeper meaning to Jesus' question. Caesarea Philippi was on the very northern edge of Palestine, about 100 miles from Jerusalem. It was a place of great natural beauty—a terraced city overlooking the northern end of the Jordan Valley. But what made it especially fitting for Jesus' question was the huge variety of religious associations connected to the area.

The town had been a center of ancient Syrian Baal worship, and abandoned temples to these old gods still dot the landscape. Also, nearby is a huge natural cavern that legend said was the birthplace of Pan, the Greek god of nature. In fact, the original name of the city was Panias. Meanwhile, Jewish legend held that the same cavern was also the source of the Jordan river, so central to Israel's story. So the region was not only important to the legends of the gods of Syria and Greece, but it also carried very strong associations for any Jew.

Finally, Herod the great, and later his son Philip, had build in the city a brand new temple of white marble. It was a temple to Caesar—not to Caesar the man, or Caesar the emperor, but to the genius Caesar which made Caesar divine.

In fact, it was only a few years before Jesus' visit that Philip had changed the name of the town from Panias to Caesarea—just one more tribute to the only man in the Empire who dared call himself a god. (And it didn't stop there; about fifteen years later, the name was changed again—this time to Neronias; after Nero, another 'divine' Caesar.)

In this city, probably more than anywhere else in Palestine, the whole spectrum of humanity's search for God was literally visible. Here the disciples could see crumbling ruins of altars of human sacrifice and freshly built temples to self-proclaimed gods. The landscape itself seemed to say that this was a sort of religious supermarket, a mall, where all the options and alternatives were on display.

This is where Jesus brought the disciples to ask them to decide which of all the competing claims for divinity they were going to follow. Looking out over all those temples, Jesus asks two questions. The first one finishes setting the stage. The second question is the purpose of the whole journey.

The first question is "Who do people say that the son of man is?". What's public opinion? After all, besides Baal, and Pan, and Caesar, there is at least one more contender for the chief of all the gods, one more possible source of religious truth. That's the Gallop poll; conventional wisdom. Who's in this week; what are the trend-setters saying, and doing, and believing? You can't choose from all the possible gods until you have this one on the table. With that, the stage was set.

Now, it doesn't take a whole lot of insight to see how our here and now is really quite a lot like their there and then. There are amazing, and important, parallels between our age, and that of the first century—parallels that were nowhere near as striking a century, or even half a century, ago.

Our culture sets before us a smorgasbord of pretenders to divinity, of competitors for our allegiance—a veritable feast of options. And we, like Peter and the rest, have to choose.

Paul Tillich, one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most influential theologians, described faith as 'ultimate concern'. He means simply that the true object of our faith, what we really believe in, is, in reality, whatever is most important to us. What do we care about more than anything else? What would we hold on the most tightly if our house, or our world, or our body were about to go up in flames? Whatever that is, it is the object of our faith. That is our god.

And remember, something does not have to call itself a god, or be what we consider religious, to be the object of our ultimate concern, to be the place where our heart is. In fact, most of the false gods folks tend to follow these days are not at all 'religious' in the usual sense. Many are perfectly good things, but good things too easily taken too far, good things taken out of perspective. In that respect, our world might be just a tiny bit more subtle the world of Caesarea Philippi.

Still, some things don't change, and today, as from the very beginning, some of the most potent, and the most powerful, contenders for our worship continue to be our pride, our possessions, and our appetites. That's hardly new; but it can be helpful to remember that these are every bit as much competing gods as were those on the hillsides of Caesarea Philippi. They are after that place in our hearts and in our lives that belongs only to God.

To be sure, these days we do have our own special spins on some of this. Sometimes we try to baptize our idols, and say that what God really wants for us just happens to be what we really want most for ourselves—things like prosperity, health, or what we call success. (good ole God, he can come in very handy). But it's still idolatry.

Sometimes, instead of baptizing our idols, and calling them God's will, we just *assume* them, and call them common sense. There are what amount to secular cults of beauty, youth, fashion, happiness, self-fulfillment, pleasure and stuff that are always ready to sign us up. Their temples are the ones that dot *our* landscape. Or, our job, our hobbies, our plans for the future, indeed our own family, can become so consuming that they become alternatives to Jesus. Other gods don't have to look like other gods, they only have to capture our hearts and our allegiance.

Like the disciples in Caesarea Philippi, we live in the midst of really impressive propaganda for a variety of ultimate concerns. Also like them, we hear the world say of Jesus something other and something less than we know him to be. And we, too, must answer his very personal and never ceasing question, "who do you say that I am?"

To join with Peter, to share his answer, is also to share Peter's journey. It is to respond to something deep within ourselves that draws us away from the temples on the hillside, or the billboards on the highway, and draws us toward this man Jesus.

Exactly what our confession of faith will look like, what its consequences will be, we will discover only gradually. As next week's Gospel shows, Peter's first attempt to work out the implications of his faith was totally wrong. It took him a lifetime and longer to discover what it all meant. In one way or another, that's the journey we will share.

But first we begin. First we affirm, or we reaffirm, what Peter was the first to say. First we enter the mystery and begin to live as we are created to live. First we look clearly at the many gods of Caesarea Philippi—and of our own age—and we say of Jesus, "you are the Christ, the son of the living God."