

23 August AD 2020/ Proper 16
Matthew 16:13-20
(1st reading from Isaiah 51:1-6)

Last week's Gospel presented us with a woman, a Canaanite, from the region of Tyre and Sidon, whose demon possessed daughter was healed by Jesus. Today we've come with Jesus to the region of Caesaria Philippi, far to the north of Galilee. And the Gates of Hell are actually in the region, it's why Jesus refers to them. Yes, you heard me correctly, the Gates of Hell (Hades) are real and the editors of our Bible might well have used upper-case letters to suggest it as a real place.

We visited the site on our trip. It's a must for tourists; a tall rock cliff face with several niches carved into it—niches which once were home to statues of gods and goddesses. (I regret that I did not pick up a stone at this site, for my collection.) The place today is called Paneas. From the parking lot, where the bus lets you out, you come upon a large opening in the cliff from which gushes one of the tributaries of the Jordan River. In this place pagans once worshiped. The opening suggests that you enter the underworld from here, "the Gate of Hades." No doubt Jesus and the Twelve passed by this spot.

As they walk the dusty roads Jesus teaches his disciples about discipleship, about sharing the good news of the Kingdom of God and his work. They will make this pagan shrine obsolete; they will free the world from their bondage to pagan gods and superstitions. We're nearly at the apex of the Gospel of MATTHEW. It's about time the disciples understood what their mission was, and who their Master is. Jesus asks them the question; it's about his identity. What are they saying about me? And "*who do the people say that I am?*"

The answers are several; John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets returned from the dead. "But what about you?" said Jesus, "*who do you say that I am?*" At that point you might have heard the crickets. Until Simon speaks up. Without hesitation he declares what none of them dared to say aloud, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*"

Jesus commends Simon. He's right on target. His answer suggests that the Spirit has revealed this truth to him. The Holy Spirit reveals the truth of Jesus to all who receive Jesus. John 16:14 tells us that is the work of the Spirit to reveal Jesus and to confirm our faith in him. And here we see it in Simon's life, for this rather brash apostle has just made a bold confession of faith; Jesus is the messiah, the Son of God everyone's been waiting for.

Simon is a fisherman. He's better known to us by his second name, Peter. Peter means rock or stone, which is an odd name for someone who spends so much time on the water. A couple of weeks ago, attempting to walk on water, Peter sank like a stone. Taking his cue from the name, Jesus pats him on the back saying, "You are Peter, rock, and on this rock (on your words, on your testimony) "I will build my church.'" This conversation between Jesus and his disciples has been greatly misunderstood, and the subject of some debate. Some have even interpreted that Jesus built the church on Peter himself!

But the foundation of the Church does not rest on man, on a sinner no less. No, the Church rests on truth—divine truth. Our hymn says it all; The Church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. She is his new creation by water and the Word... We’ll surely have to sing it when things get back to normal. Until then the truth remains, the foundation, the bedrock of the Church is Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God.

- Already in 2 Samuel 22 David praises God who saved him from Saul’s wrath; David praises God as “the Rock of Salvation,” a refuge and a fortress. We find the same language repeated in Psalm 18, and in other places.
- In Matthew 7, Jesus counsels that the wise build their house upon rock, —on the firm foundation of the fear and love of God, and not on the shifting fortunes of sand.
- Some of us carry a small stone/ rock in our pocket with a cross engraved on it; a reminder of our connection to Jesus.

Jesus’ and his teachings, are the solid rock of our faith. On God’s Word alone, and with a firm grasp on Christ through faith, Luther stood before the Imperial authorities and the Emperor himself at Worms. They declared Luther a heretic and an outlaw, but Luther went home more convinced than ever that his stand for Christ was right thing to do. And though anyone might have taken a shot at him, without repercussion, they never did.

I want to correct a misunderstanding. I began with an explanation as to the meaning of “the gates of hell.” For some reason the words of Jesus have gotten twisted so that in the thinking of many, the Church sits on a rock defending herself from the attacking enemy. The NIV Bible’s sloppy translation has only added to the confusion here.

Looking at what the text says carefully, you can only come away understanding the gates of hell will not stand when the Church attacks it. You and I are the aggressor. We are Christian soldiers in Christ’s mighty army of faith. We are on the front line, we are on the offensive. We follow Christ our leader. We are the ones banging on the gates of hell.

V. 3 we sing; *Gates of hell can never against the Church prevail;
We have Christ’s own promise, and that cannot fail...* **LSB 662**

We can certainly add Jesus’ Great Commission here. The very last words of this Gospel speak of our offensive (MATTHEW 28:-19-20): “Go into all the world making disciples of the nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...” And, “the gates hell shall not prevail,” shall not stand in the face of God’s truth.

For the time being, who Jesus is was to remain the great messianic secret. But the time would come soon enough for them to out into the world with Jesus’ truth. Them and you.

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