

Our Gospel reading for today takes place up near the headwaters of the Jordan River in a place which was called Caesarea Philippi. This ancient Roman city was located at the southwestern base of Mt. Hermon, on the northernmost border of Israel in what is known today as the Golan Heights. It is near where the water that becomes the Jordan flows out of a cavern from under a mountain. Like the water at Linville Caverns, that water is so pure there that you can drink it right out of the stream. In fact it is there that pilgrims often draw Jordan River water to take home with them, or they used to before all of the airline security restrictions.

There where the water flows out of the mountain could easily have been the very place where our Gospel for today took place, particularly because of Jesus' reference to "the gates of Hades" not prevailing against the Church. The reason is that a cavern under a mountain like the one from which the headwaters of the Jordan flows was often referred to as a gate or entrance to the underworld or Hades. After Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ, Jesus could have gestured toward that cavern as He spoke of His Church and said, "and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

In this passage, Jesus first asked the disciples, "Who do the people say that I am?" The disciples had heard people talking about him as they followed him through the crowded streets of places they went. The people had seen for themselves Jesus' power. Therefore, they thought that he might be one of these powerful figures who had somehow been brought back to life: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the other prophets".

Then Jesus popped the question of questions, “How about you guys? Who do you say that I am?” Peter blurted out, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” And Jesus answered, “Blessed are you, Simon, son of John, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.”

To clarify what Peter meant by what he said, “He called Jesus the Messiah which is the Hebrew term meaning “anointed one”. The Greek word, which is the term we most often use for this is the word, “Christ”. Therefore, when we say Jesus Christ, what we mean by this is Jesus the Messiah, the one who came primarily , as Jesus said in our Gospel last week, “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”. In other words, Jesus came to get the Jews back on track, back toward the center of God’s will for them as a nation and as God’s chosen people.

But, unfortunately most of the Jews failed to recognize their Messiah. Because of this, God opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all people, to all who WOULD embrace this Messiah whom God had sent. Last week, the Canaanite woman, a non-Jew, came to Jesus to ask for help for her daughter. Jesus, thinking of his mission, told her that He had only come to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and therefore it was not right to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” The clever woman responded, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs get to eat what falls from the master’s table.” Jesus was moved by this woman’s faith and healed her daughter instantly.

One writer I read last week said that this was the day that the Gospel went to the dogs, the non-Jews. And since we are part of those non-Jews or dogs, in last week's reading, the Gospel also came to us. Thanks be to God! All of the non-Jews, like us, who that have embraced this Messiah or Christ make up what the New Testament calls the New Israel or the Church. St. Paul describes this as God grafting us into Israel as one grafts a foreign type of branch into another type of tree.

In redeveloping countries like Haiti, botanists are experimenting with grafting fruit tree branches into some of the native trees. The idea is that native trees have a greater chance of survival than fruit trees imported from other places.

God grafted us into His chosen people. This is why we watched the video series over the summer on Judaism, because we are cousins in the faith. Therefore we have this spiritual connection or kinship with the Jews, but also remember that many of the modern day Palestinians are Christians, our brothers and sisters in Christ. Therefore, as we pray for the peace of Israel as Christians, spiritually we need not take sides. Like our country, during The Civil War, perhaps we should just be on our knees praying for peace in Israel, and some kind of unification of the country in peaceful resolution where the Israelis and Palestinians no longer see themselves as enemies, but as citizens of the country of Israel and fellow citizens of God's Kingdom. So, we pray that God would soften the hearts of the people on both sides of this present conflict, soften their hearts towards one another, and make a peaceful resolution under the one God of Jews, Christians and Moslems alike.

In the passage for today, Jesus went on to nickname Simon bar Jonah, or Simon, son of John with the name Peter, which means Rock. And Jesus then said, on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

Here, most scholars agree that Jesus is giving Peter a preeminent place in the Church. From these words, the Roman Catholic Church sees Peter as the first pope and perhaps rightly so. The thing that you and I should latch onto in this commissioning of Peter is to recognize the ordinariness of Peter. Yes, Peter was the first, as far as we know, to confess Jesus as the Christ. But he also denied Jesus three times in Jesus' time of greatest need. There is a spiritual honesty to Peter that is noteworthy. After he denied Jesus three times, Peter went out and wept bitterly. When the resurrected Jesus was, in effect, reinstating Peter after Peter's denial, and Jesus asked Peter 3 times if he loved Him, Peter was heartbroken by our Lord asking him, not once, not twice, but three times. Finally, Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, you know all things. You KNOW that I love you. Jesus' response was, "Then feed my sheep."

Here's the deal. Peter was as ordinary and as human as you and as me. He did some great things for God, but also failed big as well. It is a reminder that our Lord uses cracked and broken vessels in His service because truthfully, that's all God has to work with. So, if Jesus can use old impetuous outspoken Peter, Jesus can use you and me as well.

And remember, another characteristic that we see in Peter is His love for Jesus, and hence his love for God. It reminds us that it is okay for us to love Jesus. As we look at Peter's life, the one upon whom Christ chose to build His Church, we see a man who loved Jesus, but nevertheless ended up denying Him. And we notice that though Peter denied and failed Jesus, Jesus never denied and failed Peter.

And though we may deny our Lord at times in thought, in word and in deed, Jesus will never deny or quit loving us. In fact, He will be right there as He was for Peter outside that boat, to reach out to us and pull us out of whatever muck we have wandered into. No matter what we have done, no matter how far off track we have wandered, if we will just turn around and reach out to Him, the Savior is right there for us. That, Beloved, is the great news of the Gospel. Remember Jesus' promise to us. He said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you and I will be with you until the end of time."

One thing that might rejoice our Lord's heart this morning is for us to take a couple of minutes in silence and to pray for the peace of Israel, the place on earth where He walked among us, taught us, and gave His life for us. Let's take a couple of minutes of silence and pray for the peace of Israel, for the peace of Iraq, Afghanistan, the Ukraine Jefferson, Missouri and the other troubled places in this world. After we have spent two minutes praying in silence, I will end the time with a benediction.

Let us pray, SILENCE

“Now to Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God, our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time, now and forever. AMEN.