

## Homily 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B 16<sup>th</sup> September 2018

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When I read this passage of the Gospels the question behind the questions is; Why Caesarea Philippi? Why does Mark mention this place by name? Mark could have easily have said 'Jesus went with His disciples to the north of Galilee.' But Mark deliberately mentions Caesarea Philippi. Why? Geographically Caesarea Philippi is at the very north of the Holy Land at the head waters of the Jordan River. In fact it was built at the base of a rock bluff around a cave with a very deep spring feed pool. The water from the cave feeds into a creek that forms the Jordan River. From antiquity the spring at Caesarea Philippi was believed to be the gateway to the underworld, the gateway to Hades the realm of the abyss and death. It was believed that the fertility gods emerged from the underworld via the spring during Spring and returned to the underworld in Winter. The early Greeks built shrines to the god Pan one of their fertility gods and practiced fertility rites there. It also contained a temple built by Herod the Great in honour of his patron, Augustus Caesar. There are numerous other temples and shrines to various other gods. Caesarea Philippi was a place of pagan

rituals, a place no self-respecting Jew would enter. Yet this is the place, a place dedicated to pagan gods by the secular rulers of the day, where Jesus poses the question to His disciples: 'Who do people say I am?' The setting of today's Gospel illustrates beautifully the disruptive nature of Jesus' ministry. The Roman authorities would have simply slaughtered Jesus and His disciples if they thought He was blaspheming the gods. In fact some 60 years later after the Jewish Revolt some tens of thousands of Jews were slaughtered at the very place where Jesus was claiming to be the long awaited Jewish Messiah. The Messiah who the Jewish people thought would be a great military leader, a leader who would banish the Romans and return Israel to her former glory. It is impossible for us to imagine how far out of their comfort zone the disciples were. The disciples were a long way from home and in a completely hostile environment not the sort of place where, as a Jew you would want to draw attention to yourself yet this exactly what Jesus was doing. They would have been terrified.

Like Peter I know who Jesus is, like Peter I would have been appalled to hear Jesus talk of this suffering and death. I'm sure I would have yelled; why? I would have

been totally destroyed by Jesus reply: 'Get behind me Satan!' It is as if Jesus is saying to Peter and me here we are at a centre of pagan worship, at the very gates of the underworld; if you can't stand with me go and join the pagans. Jesus reprimands Peter saying your mind is on material things not divine things. Jesus challenges His disciples to take up their cross and follow Him. We tend to gloss this statement over with romantic notions of our cross. But the disciples would have been under no such romantic delusions they would have understood this in terms of the Roman custom of making a prisoner carry the cross arm to the site of their execution. For the disciples losing their lives was a distinct possibility it was no romantic notion. If I were them I'd have been terrified questioning my own sanity for being there.

Reflecting on today's Gospel I ask myself the same questions Jesus posed to His disciples: Who do you say I am? Have you the courage to follow me? And, are your ways God's ways? The answers to these questions are important; if I recognise Jesus as the Christ the Messiah then like the disciples I must be prepared to follow Him even though I am scared witless and I must realise that the Holy Spirit is, as

Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane describes, a disruptive force. If I follow Jesus the Christ I will be led to places which will test me, my life will be disrupted by the Holy Spirit. You see it's easier for me to sit in silence looking at a flickering candle and say I'm in the presence of God, than to listen to a mother talk about struggling to feed her kids and her fears for the future, or a husband talk about juggling part-time work because he can't find a full-time job. It's easier for me to say prayers than to face the reality of the homeless and give a couple of hours a month working on a food van handing out food to the homeless. It is easier for me to sit meditating on Jesus than it is to speak up against the deliberate lies being peddled by the media about refugees. But I must ask myself the question: What would Jesus do? I have to remind myself that Jesus was not some dreamy, genteel soul who wandered the country side doing good works. No Jesus was the Messiah a great leader who was under no delusions about his fate but was prepared to march into the very "heart of darkness". Jesus was and continues to be a challenging disruptive force. The 10<sup>th</sup> Century monk St Anselm also struggled to understand the counter intuitive nature of Jesus mission. He wrote

of Jesus: “They chose you that they might carry out their evil deeds he chose you that he might fulfil the work of his goodness. They chose you to hand over the righteous to death he chose you to save sinners from death. They that they might kill life; he that he might destroy death.” God’s ways are not our ways.

As a Church we live in very challenging times the Royal Commission has destroyed our social credibility we are indeed battered and broken. Yet the upcoming Plenary Council is a cause for great hope if we are courageous enough to accept the challenge and listen to what the Spirit is saying. As I listen I must embrace what the Spirit is saying and be aware that the Spirit is a disruptive force. Our Church and indeed our Country face very challenging times. As an old Blacktown boy, an illegal refugee, you may know him Frank Lowy said recently; “Having five Prime Ministers in five years is not acceptable democracy needs to be treated with care.” Change will be disruptive; change will force me to confront my own ‘Caesarea Philippi’; the Spirit will lead me to places I would rather not go. The question is: Do I have the courage to follow even when I’m scared witless?