

Peter's Confession at Caesarea Phillipi

Homily at St. John of God Church, San Francisco

by

Deacon Brian Bromberger

There's a story about a woman who was at work when she received a phone call that her daughter was **very** sick with a fever. She left work and stopped by the pharmacy to get medication for her daughter. When she returned to her car she found she had locked her keys inside. The woman searched and found an old rusty coat hanger on the ground. She looked at the hanger and said, "I don't know how to use this." So she bowed her head and asked God to send her some help. Within five minutes an old battered car pulled up, with a dirty, greasy, bearded man wearing an old biker skull cap on his head. The man got out of his car and asked if he could help. She said, "Yes, my daughter is very sick. I stopped to get her some medication and I locked my keys in my car. I **must** get home to her. Please, can you use this hanger to unlock my car?" He said, "Sure." He walked over to the car, and in under one minute the car was opened. She hugged the man and through her tears said, "Thank you **so** much! You are a very nice man." The man replied, "Lady, I am **not** a nice man. I just got out of prison today for car theft and have only been out for an hour." The woman hugged the man again and with sobbing tears cried out loud: "Thank you, God, for sending me a professional." Unlike our biker Good Samaritan who clearly knows who he is, Peter and the disciples are faced with **the** identity question of the Gospel: **Who** is Jesus and then in light of the answer, who am **I**? This is the story in which Simon son of Jonah changes Jesus' last name to Christ and Jesus returns the favor and changes Simon son of Jonah's first name to Peter. Initially Jesus asks rather casually, what's the **buzz**, what are people saying about me. One might say Jesus is engaging in the first century equivalent of **googling** himself.

He then turns his question around so that the disciples must **personally** answer who am **I** in your life? Peter speaking on behalf of all the disciples replies that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. As will become clearer in next Sunday's reading, Peter doesn't **fully** understand the meaning of his **own** words, envisioning Jesus more as a military conqueror against the Romans to free Israel, rather than the nonviolent defeated-by-his-enemies sufferer on the cross fulfilling God's will. Jesus realizing the disciples don't comprehend his **true** identity, instructs them to tell **no** one that he is the Christ. They shouldn't try to explain to others what they don't understand themselves. Still, Peter's own connection and openness to God has allowed him to receive a revelation that God came to earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth to show us what God is really like. Two weeks ago, Peter uttered that Jesus was the son of God, after being rescued, in spite of his doubt and fright, from drowning in the raging sea by Jesus. It was this **personal**

experience of God's saving power that enabled him to answer Jesus' question, not book or religious knowledge, based on what other people, especially his parents or teachers had said or thought. Like Peter, many Christians have the words, but don't understand the real life implications of saying yes to Jesus as disciples, echoing theologian Karl Rahner's quote that "The number one cause of atheism in the world are Christians who profess Jesus with their lips, but deny him in their actions. The world finds this unbelievable." Faith in Jesus means letting our answer to who we say **he** is, become authentic by the way **we** live.

This episode at Caesarea Philippi gives a poignant partial glimpse of who Jesus is. Here Jesus is establishing his church on Peter, the same Peter who tried to put his best foot forward but often wound up sticking it back in his mouth. And it wasn't the last time that Peter spoke the wrong comment, asked the wrong question, got the wrong point, failed to do the right action, or was impulsive, thin-skinned, and boastful. Yet imagine, Jesus, creator of the world, is willing to stake the **future** success of his earthly mission on this imperfect vessel, saying you **are** damaged goods, but I choose you because I love you and **yes** I can use you. Peter's limitations and weaknesses didn't deter Jesus from entrusting him with power and authority, both meant to be used to serve, **not** to dominate. Flaws need not be obstacles to divine grace, as there will be no question that the actual source of any success experienced is **God**.

A mother wanting to inspire her young son to take an interest in the piano, bought two tickets to a performance of a famous Polish pianist, Jan Paderewski. On the night of the concert, she and her young boy showed up early and took their seats at the front of the hall. A friend of the mother was also there and the two mothers got into a conversation. The boy's mother, engaged as she was in animated conversation with her friend, did not notice her young son slip away. When 8 o'clock came, the house lights dimmed, and a spotlight lit up the Steinway piano on stage. There on the bench sat her little boy. Innocently he began to play Chopsticks with one finger. The audience soon became quiet, but then began to hiss and boo, thinking that Paderewski wouldn't show up. But when he realized what was happening, the great pianist appeared on stage and moved quickly to the piano. He leaned over and whispered into the lad's ear, "Do not stop. Keep playing." Then reaching around the boy, the Master improvised a bass part. With his other hand, he reached around the other side of the boy and added a running obbligato. The crowd listened spellbound. When the piece was over, the audience greeted the Master and the boy with thunderous applause. "Wow," said the boy, "I didn't know I could do that!" And Jesus whispers to our hearts, "Don't quit. Keep trying ...keep on playing. With me at your side, **we** can accomplish amazing things." The hopeful message about Jesus' question is that we are not defined exclusively by where we have been, nor even by where we are **now**, but rather by where we are **going**! Jesus always knows our capabilities, wanting us to fulfill

God's desire to see us become everything we were originally intended by God to be. Our identities lie in expectation of the extraordinary things we **can and will** do, because we are made and continue to be shaped into the image of God. When we bare our souls to Jesus, all the disparate, conflicting, and broken parts of ourselves begin to be re-created into a new integrated whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. It means that we can open our eyes to see, our ears to hear, and our hearts to feel Jesus' presence and power in our daily happenings, all of which give us clues to Jesus' identity in our lives. We want our faith and relationship to Jesus to be a dynamic living reality pointing us forward and helping us reaffirm our conscious decision to follow him wherever he leads us.

Jesus is always different from our expectations, always wonderfully surprising us. Often we view Jesus as an empty canvas on which we can paint any picture we desire and make him conform to our **own** agendas, instead of molding ourselves into Jesus' likeness. Just as Jesus helped Simon the fisherman discover there is something in him that made him Peter the rock, so he will draw out of us potential we never suspected we possessed. He will help us escape the prison of our egocentric self-interests and discover our true self-transcending love of others, by learning to see others as He has seen us. Our role is to listen and reevaluate **continually** who are **we** in light of who Jesus is, as we progress through the various stages of growth in our lives. The key becomes **not** clinging to the answers of others, even the church sometimes, but personally discerning a **new** revelation of who Jesus can be for us in light of our particular current situation and where we are on our faith journey.

Together with Peter, **we** are the building blocks of the church. Peter may **be** the foundation rock, but **we** are also the pieces of stone with which the church is constructed. Are we letting God shape us and if so, how is God using us to build up the church and make it more Christlike? A preacher in China once spoke to a group of people in a town far in the interior. He was the first one to tell them the story of Jesus, and when he had talked a while, someone said: "Oh, yes, we knew Him; Jesus used to live here." The preacher was somewhat surprised, and said: "Oh, no, he lived many centuries ago in another land." But the native still insisted that he had seen Jesus, saying: "Not so, He lived in this village, and we knew Him. He loved and cared for us so much." And then the crowd led the preacher to the village cemetery and showed him the grave of a medical missionary who had lived, served, healed, and died in that community.

As Christians how we define ourselves is intimately linked with who Jesus says we are: **You** are my beloved and I call you to share that caring love with every person you encounter. Our identities are based on the knowledge that **we** are the **professionals** God has sent to establish God's reign of compassion here on earth. Years from now when **we** are dead and buried, and someone else may be

hearing the story of Jesus for the first time, could that person make the same mistake about **us** that the Chinese villagers made about the missionary? Oh, yes, we knew Him; Oh, yes, we knew Her; Jesus used to live here."