

Sermon 27 August 2023

Matthew 16:13-20

The end is looming for Jesus and he needs all the time alone with his disciples that he can get. He has much to say to them, so much to teach them.

To that end, he withdrew to the district of Caesarea Phillipi. The population is mainly non-Jewish and there Jesus would have the peace he needed to teach his disciples. First and foremost he has to get them to fully understand just who he is. We need to put ourselves in their shoes. We have the benefit of 2,000 years of history. They didn't. It was all kind of new for them and a huge ask to get their heads around the fact that this man, albeit an amazing man, a man they had got to know on a very personal level, was the Messiah. It was essential that if they were to carry on the work of Jesus and ultimately found his church, that they fully understood this. So Jesus needed this special time with them, away from the distractions of the demanding crowds.

It is interesting that he chose Caesarea Phillipi. This was an area steeped in religious history. The area was scattered with temples of the ancient Syrian Baal worship. There was also a cave which was said to be the birthplace of the Greek god, Pan, the god of nature. Pan is a towering figure in Greek mythology. That wasn't the end of it. There existed here a great marble temple built by Herod the Great and dedicated to Caesar.

It is as if Jesus deliberately set himself against the background of the world's religions, as they knew it, and challenges the disciples with the question, 'Now, who do you say I am?' Jesus is making a strong statement about his own divinity.

We then come to a very interesting few verses in which Jesus tells Peter that he is the rock on which Jesus will build his church. *'And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.'* Peter was the name given to him by Jesus, his original name being Simon. In Aramaic it is Kephias and this means 'rock.' To call anyone a rock was, and still is, the greatest of compliments.

So what does Jesus mean here? Surely, the actual rock on which our church is founded is God, or Jesus himself? But Peter was the first man on earth to make the link between Jesus and God, to realise just who Jesus is. I refer to verses 15 & 16 of our gospel reading: *'Jesus said to them, "But who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."'* This is the first time anyone had made such a statement.

So in a sense, Peter was the first member of our church and from then on, anyone who comes to the same realisation as Peter did, is another stone that is added to the edifice that is our church.

There is another very important point here. The word Jesus uses for 'church' is *qahal*, which is the word used to mean 'the gathering of the people.' So Peter was the first of the fellowship of those who believe in Christ. It was not a church in a denominational or physical sense, but rather embracing all who worship Christ.

We have touched on another point here, and that is what actually constitutes a church. Yes, it is to some extent about buildings, about an organisation with rules, regulations and rituals, but the heart of a church is people worshipping and working together. Bricks and mortar, rituals and rules do not make a church, because without people worshipping, giving, communing together, they are meaningless. In fact, Jesus railed against the Pharisees for that very reason, because of their preoccupation with rules and regulations.

Church is about people working together, it is about community. Why do we pass the peace before coming to the communion table? Because we come as a group, as a family, as a community with a common purpose and a common belief.

The word *communion* itself conveys a sense of sharing. The word derives from the Latin *communio*, which translates as 'sharing in common.' This lies at the heart of what it means to be a church. Without sharing, you do not have a community.

There is the story of the Nigerian chief who sent out his messengers to invite all the men of the tribe to a great feast. 'All the food will be provided,' they announced, 'but each man must bring one jug of palm wine.'

Ezra wanted to attend very much but he had no wine. He paced the floor trying to think of a solution to his problem. His wife suggested, 'You could buy a jug of wine. It is not too expensive for such an occasion.' 'How foolish,' Ezra replied, 'to spend money when there is a way to go free. Rather than wine, I will carry water in my jug. Several hundred men will attend the festival. What will it hurt to add one jug of water to the large pot of wine?'

On the day of the feast, the tribal drums began to beat early in the morning, calling the people to the great festival. All the men came dressed in their finest clothes, gathered by midday at the home of the chief. As each man entered the tribal grounds, he poured his jug of wine into a large earthen pot, greeted the chief and joined the throng.

When all the guests had arrived, the chief ordered the servants to fill everyone's glass with wine. When it came to the time for the toast, every man raised his glass and drank. Suddenly, a cry of disbelief arose from the crowd. What they tasted was not wine, it was water. Each man had decided, just like Ezra, that his one jug of water could not spoil the great pot of palm wine.

A community is about people sharing and pulling together. And don't think your contribution doesn't matter. It does. A community is only as good as the individuals that make up that community. Our church is a community, and I give thanks to God that our community here at St Paul's is made up of the most wonderful individuals.

Speaking of sharing, there is the story of a mother who was preparing pancakes for her sons, Kevin aged 5 and Ryan aged 3. The boys were arguing over who would get the first pancake. Their mother saw an opportunity for a moral lesson on sharing. She said, 'If Jesus was sitting here, he would say, 'Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait.' Kevin turned to his younger brother and said, 'Ryan, why don't you be Jesus!'

Now here's a quote I can relate to – American writer, Dillon Burroughs said, 'The church is not a campus but a community. Pastors are not CEOs, they are shepherds.'

Let me finish by making a point regarding our vision for a new church and community centre. I believe that a church should be a community that takes care of the whole person - body, mind and spirit. I really do believe that our spiritual needs are closely aligned with our emotional and even physical needs. We are like a vehicle – we need all cylinders to be working, and if one cylinder is not functioning properly, it impacts on the functioning of the whole. This is precisely why the community centre is such a vital part of our vision and plan for a new church. Need I say more!

Rev Warner Wilder