

## A CHIP OFF THE OL' ROCK

A sermon on Matthew 16:13-20

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

Today's Gospel lesson comes after some of the religious leaders were trying to trap Jesus, asking Him to perform more signs and wonders.

And Jesus told His disciples to beware the "yeast" of the Pharisees and Saducees, that is, beware of how their ideas and expectations can cause trouble to bubble and rise up.

And it is at this point that Matthew introduces this episode of their discussion at Ceasarea Philipi.

Jesus asks his disiples, "who do people say the Son of Man is?"

He refers to Himself a lot as the "Son of Man"

- Jesus is identifying Himself as a figure from prophecy.

But he knows all about himself.

What do other folks think?

Presumably Jesus knows that too, but wants to draw a distinction here with his questions.

The answers the disciples give are positive ones: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah —

All famous figures known to have been close to God. Prophets all.

What answers might we give today?

"Some say Jesus was a great moral teacher."

"Some say he was a revolutionary."

"Some say he was a myth."

"Some say he was a prophet."

"Some say he was a therapist."



But the more important question is NOT "What does the internet say about Jesus?"

BUT YOU, who do YOU say that I AM? (Note the I AM)

But. Jesus is drawing a contrast here with that BUT.

And the YOU Jesus is adressing is plural.

It seems instead of individual opinions,

he is looking for a shared understanding from His disciples.

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And it comes out of the mouth of Peter: You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.  
But this is not just the confession of a single man.

This is the confession of the disciples, and the confession of the Church.

Immediately after Peter identified Jesus as the Messiah,  
Jesus now decides to identify Peter by his proper full name.  
Simon bar Jonah. Simon the son of Jonah.  
Perhaps Jesus does this as a point about how identity,  
then even more than now, is tied up with who your father is.



The blessed Theophylact puts it aptly:

It is as though Jesus is saying, “Just as you are the son of Jonah,  
so am I the Son of My Father in heaven, and of one essence with Him.”

And like Peter, Simon son of Jonah, one knows Jesus in relation to His Father in Heaven.  
And Jesus tells him as much, that this understanding that just fell out of Peter’s mouth  
had been revealed to him by God.

This reminds me of what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:3

“No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit”

Christian faith is not merely having correct information about Jesus.

It is being given eyes to recognize who Jesus actually is.



Especially in the Middle Ages, and the rise of Scholasticism,  
there was an assumption that Christianity was entirely rational  
and could be demonstrated by logical proofs,  
and if you had a thinking brain you would be a Christian.

And I for one think that Christianity is indeed highly rational in many  
respects,

but I also know that the best “proof” for God is simply experience of Him.

That is, reason only gets you so far, often to a theoretical probability of a God.

Getting to know God through prayer and worship, reliance on Him, that is a different thing.

And one of the things that often comes out of getting to know God  
is getting a deeper understanding of yourself.

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This brings us back to the next thing Jesus tells Peter.  
Peter told Jesus “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”  
Jesus answers “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church,  
and the Gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”  
There is wordplay going on here.  
In Greek, Peter is Petros and the word for rock is Petra.



Catholics put great importance on this verse is proving the centrality of Peter,  
who would become the first bishop of Rome, for the whole church.  
While I don't care to dunk too hard on the Catholics,  
there is gold in this line that can get obfuscated in fights over the Pope's pope-liness.

[But I will note that the earliest commentaries I could find commenting on this verse  
assume that the Rock is not Peter himself but rather the confession he just proclaimed.  
Theodore of Mopsuestia (5<sup>th</sup> century):

Having said that [Peter's] confession is a rock, Jesus stated “Upon this rock I will build my church.” This means He will build His church upon this same confession and faith. ... It was from this confession, which was going to become the common property of all believers, that he bestowed upon him this name, the rock. ]



What I want to focus on here is the rockiness of the Rock.  
Do you remember my last sermon on Jacob's Ladder?  
In that story, what did we say the Rock signified? JESUS!  
That wasn't a one-off.

In the Bible, rocks are used over a hundred times to signify God and His steadfast reliability.

Epiphanius (4<sup>th</sup> century):

*For Christ is a rock which is never disturbed or worn away. Therefore Peter gladly received his name from Christ to signify the established and unshaken faith of the church .... The faith of the apostle, which was founded upon the rock of Christ, abides always unconquered and unshaken.*

Again, not just Peter, but the Faith he professes has this rock-quality to it.  
It is reliable, it gives steady-footing, it endures.

So, just as one inherits a name from their father, Peter is being named for the Rock (of Ages).  
He is in a sense, what I put as my sermon title: “A Chip off the Ol' Rock.”  
But not only Peter.

## A CHIP OFF THE OL' ROCK

The Church itself is also to be “a Chip off the Ol’ Rock,”  
taking it’s identity and mission from Christ our Rock and our Redeemer.

This is about more than names, but the something deeper that those names give expression to.  
The Church as Rock, hewn from the quarry that is Christ, also has those same qualities,  
the same familial likeness, and the same steadfastness.

In the second century, a Church Father named Origen tells us that Peter becomes “Peter”  
precisely because he has confessed Christ rightly. Anyone who truly makes Peter's confession  
participates in what Peter represents.

And Peter certainly was a great leader, but he wasn’t quite infallible.  
It only takes four more verses for Jesus to tell him,  
“Get behind me Satan, for you are a stumbling block to me.”  
And that is actually very good news for us.  
Peter is simultaneously blessed, renamed, commissioned,  
mistaken, corrected, and ultimately restored.



Christ builds his Church out of imperfect people  
who nevertheless confess him.  
Christ does not call Peter a rock because Peter is rock-solid,  
but because Christ is going to make something out of him.

Jesus gives Peter identity, and also purpose, mission.  
Or rather, He shows how Peter and his confession fits into Jesus’ mission.  
Jesus doesn’t say “Go build my church” — He says “I WILL BUILD my church” “MY Church”

Indeed, the church’s identity and mission flows right from Christ’s identity.

- If Jesus is merely a teacher, the church is merely a school.
- If Jesus is merely a moral example, the church is merely a self-improvement society.
- If Jesus is merely a political liberator, the church becomes merely a political movement.
- But if Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God,”  
then the church is something altogether different.  
It is the community gathered around the living Son of God.

And then the Church does not depend solely on our own competence.  
It would have fallen apart long ago if that had been the case.  
But the Church indeed remains.

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After all, Jesus tells us that even the Gates of Hades will not prevail against it!

A note about their setting - Caesarea Philippi - is in order.

They are about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, at the base of Mount Hermon.

And even though it was geographically in Israel,

Caesarea Philippi was a region who had largely given up on the One True God.

It was littered with pagan temples, especially to the Greek god Pan.

There are also caves.

Sacred caves from which water would flow in the spring,

caves that were believed to be an entrance to the underworld itself.

In a way, Jesus and his disciples are there, at the Gates of Hades.



Sometimes, we might be tempted to view the Church as a fortress under siege  
from a society that has moved on from God,  
just like the region of Caesarea Philippi did.

But then the whole thing about the Gates of Hades  
seems very strange indeed.

Gates don't normally attack anybody.

Gates are defensive architecture.

It seems that Jesus doesn't picture the Church hiding behind the gates  
while the forces of Evil attack.



This connects with the early Church's fascination with Christ's descent into Hades.

This is only hinted at in the scriptures,

but made visible in iconography and in other writings of the early church.

Christ enters the realm of death and breaks its gates from within.

The icon of the Resurrection shows broken gates beneath Christ's feet

as he brings Adam and Eve up from the grave.

The resurrection has already determined the outcome: The Rock wins.

No Gates can shut out the love of God

And so the Church can go out into the world,

sharing what it means to live as Chips of that Ol' Rock.



*Now to the One who by the power at work within us  
is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine,  
to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus  
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*