

Dreghorn and Springside Parish Church

Sunday 23rd August 2020

Bible reading: Matthew 16:13-20

Peter's Declaration about Jesus

¹³ Jesus went to the territory near the town of Caesarea Philippi, where he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ "Some say John the Baptist," they answered. "Others say Elijah, while others say Jeremiah or some other prophet." ¹⁵ "What about you?" he asked them. "Who do you say I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

¹⁷ "Good for you, Simon son of John!" answered Jesus. "For this truth did not come to you from any human being, but it was given to you directly by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And so I tell you, Peter: you are a rock, and on this rock foundation I will build my church, and not even death will ever be able to overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven; what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven." ²⁰ Then Jesus ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Sermon 'Who do you say I am?' Giant steps to Jesus.

When I was a wee boy at nursery we used to play a game called 'Mother, may I?' You might have played it too? It is sometimes also known as 'Father, may I?' In the game you take a turn to ask permission to take baby steps or giant steps to reach the parent. The first one to get there wins the game, they then became parent and it starts all over again.

Today in our Bible reading we see some baby steps and some giant steps. And the giantest step of them all, was the leap of faith taken by Simon Peter who announced that Jesus was 'the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

The first giant step we witness today is Jesus and his disciples going off the official map again. They are 20 miles north of the Sea of Galilee once more striding out into the land of the Gentiles.

Caesarea Philippi was a city that sat beneath Mount Hermon near the source of the river Jordan. In the past it had been a cultic centre for the worship of the pagan god Baal, and then later it was the site of worship for the Greek god Pan.

And most recently that old city of Paneas, named after Pan had been rebuilt by Phillip son of Herod the Great. There Philip built a new temple and dedicated it to the Roman Empire, renaming the city Caesarea Philippi; after the new rulers of the area 'the Caesars' and of course, after himself Phillip, their puppet king.

And to crown all of this heady mix of religion and politics the area of Caesarea Philippi, under Mount Hermon, was also the location of much Jewish apocalyptic literature. With visions of deliverance occurring there, foretelling a 'Messiah', a 'Son of Man' who would come and overthrow the rulers of the earth.

Jesus and his disciples walk, hemmed in on every side by this heady mix of competing gods, political powers and stirring prophecy. And there in that potent mix Jesus asks his disciples 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?'

At first, they take some fairly pedestrian baby steps 'some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' Jesus then becomes even more personal... now you've told me what others are thinking, but what about you? 'Who do you say I am?' And then Simon Peter takes that giant leap of faith - 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!'

Not any dead god like Baal, or Pan. Not a mere human who thinks they are a god like the Caesars, but the Messiah, the promised one, the living God's one and only anointed Son. There in the place of the gods and prophecy - it has been revealed. Jesus is the true Messiah, Son of the living God.

The next great, giant step forward is the renaming of Simon to become Peter. Jesus says, 'Peter, you are a rock, and on this rock foundation I will build my church...' Before Peter was called Peter, no one was called Peter. We might these days have actors named 'The Rock', but not back then. Literally Jesus says, 'You are Rock and on this rock foundation, I will build my church.' The Rock is that Peter is the foundation stone of a new community, the church that the Messiah will build. A community not defined by race, gender, class or all these other labels we give - but by faith alone, inclusive of all who, like Peter, perceive and confess Jesus' true identity.

And even though this is a short passage we still find space for one more giant step. A good while after I finished nursery and probably almost finished primary school too, I was given my first key to the house. It's a rite of passage, a time when a child is trusted. The key went on a string around my neck and stayed there, lest I forget.

The giant step at the end of this passage is that Jesus entrusts Peter with the keys of the Kingdom of heaven. Keys to open the Kingdom. A Kingdom that the people of Israel had kept shut for far too long, to far too many. Keys to innovate, keys to continue his work, keys that give authority to make decisions in Jesus name. And then after all these momentous giant steps a sudden 'stop'! As if to pre-empt their question 'Father, may I... tell the world?' Jesus says, 'Do not tell anyone that I am the Messiah'. Because the time for the fullness of that revelation was not yet right.

But he was soon to say 'go'. Go and make disciples of all nations baptising and teaching and make more disciples. And those disciples did, and they have entrusted each generation that has followed with the keys to the Kingdom. Keys that we now inherit, keys that say to us that we too are trusted by God and by our forbearers, keys that give us authority, keys that encourage us to be innovative.

One of our members, Bill Kelly shared a poem with me last week. It is a poem that his wife carried in her handbag called 'The Cross in my pocket' a small cross that helped her to remember that Jesus is Messiah – the Son of the living God. The poem goes like this,

I carry a cross in my pocket,
A simple reminder to me,
Of the fact that I am a Christian,
No matter where I may be.

This little cross is not magic,
Nor is it a good luck charm,
It isn't meant to protect me,
From every physical harm.

It's not for identification,
For all the world to see,
It's simply an understanding,
Between my Saviour and me.

When I put my hand in my pocket,
To bring out a coin or a key,
the cross is there to remind me,
Of the price He paid for me.

It reminds me, too, to be thankful,
For my blessings day by day,
And to strive to serve Him better,
In all that I do and say.

It's also a daily reminder,
Of the peace and comfort I share,
With all who know my Master,
And give themselves to His care.

So, I carry a cross in my pocket,
Reminding no one but me,
That Jesus Christ is the Lord of my life,
If only I'll let Him be.

We remember that if it had been an ordinary man who died on that cross it would just have been another horrific death under Roman tyranny. But on the cross died no 'ordinary man'. He was, and he is the Messiah, the son of the living God.

No one else could die for your sins. No one else can bring us into a right relationship with our Heavenly Father. No one else can bring us to new life. We echo Peter's words of faith for our Lord Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

Jamie Milliken
23rd August 2020