

Twenty First Sunday of the Year

I suppose that if we were asked to recall a Biblical story about St Peter this one (Matthew 16:13-20) would feature high on the list. However if we were to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land although we might visit many places associated with St Peter it is unlikely that we would go to the 'region of Caesarea Philippi' as it is a distant place some way away from any other biblical sites and it has not been marked by the building of any churches or other monuments.

However the incident described today is important for two reasons, firstly Peter's profession of faith which is found in some form in all four gospels and secondly the promise that Jesus makes to Peter which is found in Matthew's gospel alone.

Jesus asks his disciples two questions, firstly he asks them 'who do people say that I am' and they are easily able to recount the opinions of other people, but when he asks them 'but you, who do you say that I am' it is only Peter who speaks up, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'. The same two questions are addressed to us today. The difference between them is the difference between knowing about Jesus, knowing what others believe him to be, and knowing Jesus ourselves and being able to express our faith in Him. The first question is easier to answer than the second one which asks us to respond in a very personal way. How do we feel when faced with that question today?

The other aspect of today's gospel reading that is important is the promise that Jesus makes to Peter. The image that usually captures people's imaginations is that of the keys. If you see a statue or a picture of St Peter he will be holding a pair of keys. In a lot of stories, songs, and even jokes about the 'gates of heaven' it is St Peter who is portrayed as being the gate keeper.

As Catholics we believe that the role of Peter continues in the church through the ministry of his successors, the Popes. The church sometimes speaks of the 'ministry of the keys' or of 'binding and loosing' which the Bishop of Rome exercises. However perhaps the most important witness that the Pope gives is that he is able to proclaim to the world the same faith that was professed by Peter in the region of Caesarea Philippi some nearly 2,000 years ago, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'.

So if we don't already do so we can make a special note this week to pray for Pope Francis and for his ministry as the successor of St Peter, may he continue to profess his faith in Christ with confidence and courage. We pray too for Pope Benedict, that the Lord may continue to be close to him in his retirement. And as for ourselves we can think how we would answer that question that Jesus addressed to Peter and his companions, 'but you, who do you say I am?'

A video clip of the homily can be accessed here: <https://youtu.be/SEOiVBrRdyk> or at www.churchservices.tv/lincoln