

21ST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A (2026)

Today's Gospel reading is, perhaps, best known for being read on the feast of Ss Peter and Paul, proclaiming, as it does, S. Peter's triumphant confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. And, whilst Jesus' subsequent declaration that Simon is to become Peter, the rock upon which he will build his Church, is contested in its practical application – the Papacy derives universal prerogatives by virtue of it, which claim many Christians dispute – it remains an important turning point in the story of Jesus' earthly ministry, as his identity and vocation are recognised and confessed by his closest followers before he 'sets his face to go to Jerusalem' to endure his Passion and death. But what matters just as much as Peter's confession itself, and what is often overlooked, is the significance of the place where Jesus chose to pose his question, 'Who do you say that I am?' Caesarea Philippi was a city that had been established by Philip the Tetrarch, the occupying Roman's puppet-king of Judaea, at the site of an ancient Greek temple dedicated to the god Pan. It was located at the foot of Mount Hermon, and, by Jesus' day, had become a cosmopolitan crossroads, where Greek, Roman and Jewish people and cultures interacted, albeit not without friction. And, though Jesus could have chosen to ask his disciples about his identity in Galilee or even Jerusalem, the choice of Caesarea Philippi is deeply significant because of what it represents: for, here, confronted by the architecture and cults of both Greek and Roman paganism – the polytheistic religions against which the monotheism

of Judaism stood out like a sore thumb – Jesus not only challenged his disciples to affirm their own hope and belief in the salvation that was possible only through the God of Israel and his Messiah, but also to make that confession in a place that epitomised the world into which that nascent community of faith would be sent. Confirmed in the Jewish understanding of the one God, immersed in the promises of the Hebrew Scriptures, and convinced of Jesus' unique identity and vocation, S. Peter and his companions were being prepared to be witnesses of Jesus' death and resurrection, and for their mission to tell that Good News to the world, as Jesus tested their conviction that they trusted him, and believed who he claimed to be. This would become the foundation of all Christian doctrine, and the Church the guarantor of orthodox belief.

And Jesus asks the same question of humanity today: 'Who do you say that I am?' Ultimately, this is not a question that can be answered by societies, even though the modern West continues to display vestiges of its Christian past. No, it is a question that individuals must answer for themselves; and then, being so convinced by Christ's claims, work with others within the household of faith to witness to his redeeming purposes and love, and thus to transform society with the virtues and values of the Kingdom of God. Notice that, in questioning his disciples about his identity, Jesus implied that it wasn't sufficient simply to echo what others said – that he is this person, or that – but that personal faith and confession are required: we must decide for ourselves if Jesus' claims are true.

Because, like S. Peter and the other disciples, Jesus sends us out into a world no less representative of competing cultures and ideologies than was Caesarea Philippi. This is why theology matters, and that we hold fast to the teaching of the Church, and do not allow ourselves to be led astray by strange doctrines. Because people say some very odd, and erroneous, things about Jesus: Islam contends that he was only a prophet – heresy; many secularists see in him an inspiration to be kind and compassionate – but only by their definitions of kindness and compassion; and just as many value his teachings as ethical guidance, but don't want to be troubled by their logical conclusions – morality without religion. But, whatever others might say, if, like S. Peter, you answer Jesus' question by responding, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,' then everything changes, and you must change as well. One cannot confess Jesus to be the incarnate Son of God, crucified, risen and ascended, and then simply walk away, and think no more of it. The truth and consequences of Christianity are redemptive, for individuals and society; and if we wonder why the Church is in retreat, might one of the reasons be that even many Christians find it difficult to say that Jesus is 'the Christ, the Son of the living God' with any real conviction? To know Jesus' true identity is the beginning and end of mission; and our spiritual enemy's counter-attack is to prevail against human souls by convincing them that Jesus is anything other than 'the Christ, the Son of the living God'. 'Who do you say that I am?' Salvation demands, and depends upon, your answer. Amen.