

21st Sunday (A)

23rd August 2026

‘You are Peter, and on this Rock I will build My Church’

Is 22: *I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David*

Ps 137: *Your merciful love is eternal, discard not the work of Your hands.*

Rom 11: *how inscrutable His ways ...*

Mt 16:13–20: *You are Peter, and I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven*

I have made 4 pilgrimages to the Holy Land over the past 15 years, and I look forward to going again one day, when things have calmed down politically. But only on one of those trips have I been able to get to Caesarea Philippi. That’s because it’s in a very out-of-the-way place, up in the foothills of Mt Hermon, way north of Lake Galilee, in the Golan Heights. In Jesus’s day it was a very non-Jewish area, the site of pagan worship, shrine to the god Pan, with its caves and many rivulets, the source of the River Jordan. It was, therefore, a place of mystique, and syncretistic spirituality. What an extraordinary location for Jesus to take the Apostles, but a place where He could allow them to ponder on His Mission amongst them, the meaning of His very person, within, and even beyond, Judaism. *Who is He, really?* — this is His question to them here.

Both St Mark and St Matthew have this episode at remote Caesarea Philippi as the very centrepiece of their

Gospels (Mk 8/Mt 16). It serves as the turning point, the crux, on which their Gospel narrative hinges: prior to that, the apostles are ‘coming to know;’ after that, they are coming to know *what it entails*. And ‘it’ is the admission, the confession, the belief: “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*” Without this realisation, of course, Our Lord’s mission would have failed!

But it took the apostles *time* to appreciate Who Jesus was. The Gospels admit it; it’s why this event is at the mid-point of the Gospel: Jesus only revealed Himself to them gradually. He didn’t come down on the earth and from the first moment say: “hello, I’m the Messiah, get your act together.” In fact, at first, even to the demons who felt His divine presence, he urged that He not be made known. The reason is clear: that His message was far too rich and significant to be absorbed in a sound-bite, in one sitting, or at a press conference. *How rich are the depths of God — how deep His wisdom and knowledge ...* The message of the Son of God on earth was, first, His *life*: so the apostles first lived with Him and heard and saw Him,

so that they could come to know Him. It wasn't a simple handout, or a download: they needed time to get to know Him: just as any of needs time to get to know the depths of a friend, or of someone we are thinking of marrying. They grew to experience the depths of His love, not just for them but for all, and in doing so gradually came to recognize Who this must be. It is Simon Peter, as we heard in the Gospel, who finally is willing to put this understanding into words: '*You are the Christ,*' he said, '*the Son of the living God.*' Eventually, then, these months and years of Jesus's company have sown the seeds of conviction: that He can only be the Messiah long-hoped-for.

It is for any of us *a lifetime's work* to get to know Christ, allowing Him gradually to shear off the layers of our disbelief and reluctance; to the point where we can stand before Him in total honesty and with true devotion and say to Him: *to me, also, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.* As in any relationship, it takes time. It takes time to be sure. Sometimes, if one has been hurt in love, one is slow to open up again ... But, offered true

love, one can have the courage to speak the true desires of the heart, to have courage to make that response at last, to be loving in return, and to open up one's heart to the joys of living in love. This is what St Peter is doing: he is putting his life on the line: he is uttering something dangerous and new, yet exciting and liberating: that this Jesus, *this seeming man*, is truly God. To say this was truly blasphemous, unless it were wonderfully true! It is what we must do! We must make our faith a truly adult experience — an expression of *adult love and commitment*. A friend said to me once: no amount of teaching and talking about the faith will get anywhere, if those listening are not *already in love with Jesus*. Only if you are deeply in love with God made known to us in Christ, will the teaching make sense. If you are in love with Him, then the teaching will ring true: loving Him you will come to know Him; knowing Him, you will love Him even more.

Let's go back to the Gospel narrative and see how Jesus responds to the profession of faith. When His apostles, voiced by Peter, express the faith in Him that they

have come to, Our Lord's reaction is ecstatic, so buoyant. See how positive, immediate, are the words of Jesus: "*Blessed are you, Simon ... You are 'Peter' and on this 'Rock' I will build My Church.*" Not, "OK, that's good; a few more months of teaching, some revision classes, a few exams, then we'll see if you can graduate ..."! Our Lord's reaction to Peter serves to show how crucial for each of us is this statement of faith. St Peter may have been the first to express it, and that faith is the 'Rock' on which the Church is founded. But each of *us* must also make that statement of faith: we can't get away with fudging the issue, half-saying it, or bypassing it. We have to say it, mean it, believe it and live it: our personal faith is the 'rock' that is part of that great Rock that is the Church. "*You, Jesus, are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" It anchors us; grounds us; means that our lives are held firm and not subject to the tossing waves of the world and the times we live in. The world can be disorienting, dispiriting, even depressing — so, more than ever as Christians we have to repeat that faith which holds us firm.

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and for ever." Nothing in this world can prise us away from the blessed destiny that Our Lord has for us, if we remain true to Him, anchored to that Rock of St Peter's profession: "*Jesus, my loving Lord, You are truly the Son of the living God!*"

This naturally leads us to consider the role of St Peter himself, given by Jesus the 'keys of the Kingdom' — *the primacy of Peter*, and subsequently, the papacy: this is crucial to our reading of the passage as Catholics. It is undeniable that Our Lord's words are directed at Peter in a special way, because the new name, "Peter," given to Simon is of course the very word, "rock." In the mind of Christ, St Peter's special role as 'prince of the apostles' is foundational; it is fully and divinely intended by Him. It accords with so much other evidence of the Gospels and the *Acts of the Apostles*, that Peter is considered the spokesman and leader: many times He is the one who speaks up, as here at Caesarea Philippi. And at the end, by the Sea of Galilee, it is Peter who is singled out by the risen Jesus for a key role in the mission; "Feed My sheep."

How do we interpret this primacy of Peter? We see in the *Acts of the Apostles* that he exercises his leadership in collaboration with the other brethren, whilst still maintaining a distinct role. A high point in this is the Council of Jerusalem (c. 49AD), recounted in Acts 15, when the apostles meet with St Paul, Barnabas, and others to discuss important matters with regard to evangelizing the Gentiles and the extent to which they should keep the prescripts of the Jewish Law. Here Peter takes a key place, but it is clearly the Council itself which has the highest authority. This sets the pattern for the Church, wherein the Ecumenical Council — that is, the bishops of the world gathered in Council together with the Pope himself (or at least with his permission and usually with his legate) — has the highest authority to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit and to teach. Councils of the Church happen rarely: after that first one in 49AD in Jerusalem, the next didn't happen until 325AD, at the height of the Arian crisis, then subsequently in 381AD, 431AD, 451AD ... The most recent councils were that of Trent (mid 16th c.) and then the 1st and 2nd Vatican Councils (1870 & 1962–65). It is these Councils, esp. at moments of great

crisis, that have steered the Church through difficult times, and taught with clarity for the faithful the true doctrine of the Lord.

But it is also Catholic teaching that the Pope can teach, definitively and authoritatively, alone. But let's be clear what this *infallibility* amounts to. The Pope's infallibility is an occasional exercise of the infallibility of Christ's Church, a gift of the Spirit, when she teaches solemnly on a key matter of faith or morals. The Pope exercises this charism only rarely: examples would include the definition of Mary's immaculate conception (1854, Pius IX); her assumption into heaven ([1950, Pius XII](#)); and the solemn statements made by Pope John Paul II in [Veritatis Splendor](#) (1993) regarding the immorality of abortion and euthanasia. On these occasions, when the Pope speaks *ex cathedra*, he does so with clarity and only on matters of faith or morals; it is a clearly defined exercise of his teaching office, for the good of the Church.

We thank the Lord for the Petrine office, begun at that remote outpost of Caesarea Philippi, and still crucial to anchoring our personal faith today in Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God!