



21st Sunday in Ordinary Time - Matthew 16: 13-20

## ‘Who do you say that I am?’

Jesus looked down at the footpath beneath him. He was filled with anxiety because this good brown earth he walked upon would soon end for him. The world in which he lived was going to be taken away from him. Jerusalem waited. As Jesus walked he realized each step north was toward a false safety. As long as he was going north he was away from Jerusalem. But time was running swiftly and the days could now be numbered.

John was at his side and saw the worry on Jesus’ face. “What troubles you, Lord?” he asked.

Jesus answered with a brave smile. “The future.” he said.

Jesus knew that when they reached the Roman city of Caesarea Philippi they would have to turn back. When they started south Jesus would begin the first steps of his own death march.

Having crossed to the east side of the Sea of Galilee, the long-robed men walked to Bethsaida where Jesus restored the sight of a blind man. Bethsaida had been rebuilt and renamed Julias, the name of Emperor Augustus’ daughter. This was a political gesture by Philip the Tetrarch. Philip named his own capitol city Caesarea to honor Rome, but added his own name after it to avoid confusion with Caesarea Maritima on the coast.

When Jesus and the disciples arrived at Caesarea Philippi they were deep in a gentile country. No Jews lived here. Roman banners blew in the wind outside the palace. Helmeted centurions guarded the entry to this remote outpost filled with foreigners who pretended to enjoy the

grace of Greece under the watchful eyes of the Empire and the Tetrarchy.

In one of the outlying villages near the river Jesus found a place to retreat. For a time he would give his full attention to deepening the formation of the disciples, preparing them to carry on after him. He began with the question: “Who do people say that I am?”

After they answered incorrectly he asked them directly: “And who do you say that I am?”

Peter told him: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus praised him: “Good for you, Simon, son of John.” Jesus assured him that such an understanding must have been revealed to him directly “by my Father in heaven.”

Jesus placed his hands on Peter’s strong shoulders and solemnly entrusted him with the future.

“Peter, you are a rock and on this rock foundation I will build my church.”

Peter smiled as Jesus called him by his nickname. Peter means rock. Their faith that Jesus was the Messiah was the cornerstone that would have to support the faith of the disciples for the rest of their lives.

Jesus continued: “...and not even death will ever be able to overcome it. I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven.”

The disciples listened intently as they were told that Peter would have the power to bind things and to loose things upon the earth. With these keys to the kingdom Peter would receive the transfer of power.

Peter felt a shiver of fear sweep through him. He was just a fisherman. He knew he didn’t have the ability or the strength to achieve such heights. Peter wanted to run; back to his boat, back to Capernaum. But he knew he would never be able to return to his peaceful life as a fisherman. Instead, he stood now before an awesome threshold.

It was merciful that he could not comprehend the immensity of what would follow. Peter was trembling as he heard the sounds of the water gurgling over the rocks in the river. A cool breeze fluttered the leaves of the trees. In the distance there was the sound of summer thunder. It looked like it was going to rain.



We must also answer Jesus’ question: “Who do you say that I am? Our own answer will describe our faith. It will also describe the life we lead in this world and in the next.