

Isaiah 51:1-6

Psalm 138

Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 16:13-20

Sermon for August 27, 2023

THE REVELATION

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Summary: Faith comes through hearing.

In the events recounted in our gospel reading for today, Jesus has led his disciples into the area of a town called Caesaria Phillippi, a mainly non-Jewish area about twenty-five miles north and east of Galilee. Matthew tells us about two things that happened on that particular occasion. This morning we're going to talk about the first of those two things, and next week Jim will lead us in taking a look at the second.

Matthew 16: Vv. 13-20

This particular episode is often referred to as representing the hinge of Jesus's earthly ministry, the point at which it reaches an important turning point, the point at which Jesus turns and begins his journey towards Jerusalem and the Cross. He has brought his band of followers out here to get away from the crowds so that he can, so to say, examine them, and see whether the time has now arrived for him to make that fateful pivot. And what does that examination consist in?

Well, Jesus begins by asking the disciples as a group what the general impression is of him that has been created back in Galilee during the course of his two or three year ministry there. After all his teaching and preaching he's offered and all the miracles he's performed, what do the people back there think? And in response, the disciples say that some of the people are equating him with John the Baptist, some with Elijah, some with Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.

As an aside, the disciples aren't saying that the people back in Galilee believe that Jesus is one of those people reincarnated: the Jews had no doctrine of reincarnation. They're saying the sort of thing we might say about a new young baseball slugger: Why, he's another Babe Ruth, or he's another Willy Mays...meaning, he's got the same power and skills that they had, he's another of their type or quality.

And what was the type or quality of the prophetic figures from Israel's history they mention? What made someone a true prophet in the Jewish understanding of the term? In their way of thinking, a prophet was an individual who had been, so to say, possessed by God's own Holy spirit and used by God for a season to deliver God's message, to speak God's own words, to provide God's own truths to the nation of Israel to deal with whatever situation threatened that nation at the time. They were, for the season in which they were inhabited by God's spirit, not speaking their own thoughts, but delivering God's thoughts.

So Jesus brought his disciples out, and having heard from them what the crowds in Galilee were now thinking about him...what those who had not had the advantage of knowing Jesus personally were thinking about him...he turns to those closest to him, to those who had been in personal company with him on a daily basis, a weekly basis, a yearly basis, to those who might be expected to know him best...and he asks, But you? Who do you say that I am? And it's at that point, in response to that question, that Peter steps forward, and gives the answer for which Christ had been waiting, the answer he had brought his disciples out to this quiet place to hear from them, the answer that would tell him that the time had now arrived, the breakthrough had been achieved, that the door had now opened for him onto the path that could lead to the cross.

Peter steps away from the crowd, steps away from the general opinion, and tells Jesus what he personally, what he, Peter, thinks. He says: You are not the prophet conveying the words of God. You are not the spokesperson of God. You are the son of the living God.

And Jesus turns to him and says: Peter, this is your revelation; this is God's gift to you.

And in reflection on what Jesus is saying here, I'd like today to focus on two things.

The first the profound implication for each of us of the question Jesus asked his disciples that day.

In the Jewish world view, reflected throughout the Old Testament, the primary relationship was always between God and the nation of Israel. The successes and failures of the nation were the primary concerns of the prophets; their warnings were generally speaking warnings about national obedience to God's commands, and their explanations were by and large explanations of either the prosperity or devastations of the nation due either to its commitment to or abandonment of national adherence to God's commandments.

The great revolution that Jesus introduced was to reveal that the relationship with which God was first and foremost concerned was not that between God and a nation, but between God and each and every one of God's children. God loves each and every one of us with an infinite love, not a particular nation, or a particular family, or a particular social class. That's one of the many things involved in Jesus always referring to God as Father. The parent/child analogy is what best describes the relationship God is focused on, not the King and his country; the Good Shepherd cares about every individual lost sheep.

We have the great good fortune today of having been born and raised in a country that in its conception and origin at least sought to base itself upon this essentially Christian understanding of God and His infinite love for each individual. Remember and reflect upon the opening words of the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with **certain** unalienable **Rights**, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

But this way of thinking was not self-evident to anyone until Jesus brought that revelation into the world, nor is it self-evident even today anywhere in the collectivist or caste-based systems of government that prevail everywhere in the world that is not fundamentally imbued with the Christian perspective of God as loving parent, and all people – you and me included – as God's beloved children.

So to return to our passage, when Jesus turned to his group of followers and, after having asked them what the general opinion was of Himself, pauses, and then says: But you. Who do you say that I am?, what Jesus was looking for was the first realization, however faint and inarticulate, that what God cares about is not what

the general collective thinks, not what the authority figures think, but what you think, because God seeks to be in relationship with you individually, not with your country, not with your ruling class, not with your church, but with you.

And after Peter has stepped forward and given voice to his own revelation and Jesus says: Yes, and that is the rock on which I will build my church, the rock he's referring to is the illumination of the eternal centrality of our one-on-one relationship with God the father.

The application of that for us lies at the very heart of our Christian faith. The rock at the foundation of our faith – of your faith and of my faith – is our personal one-on-one relationship with God. Faith grows from within, it is not imposed from without; it is not created by your circumstances or your church; it is the gift of God's Holy Spirit. It is like a mustard seed, planted in each of us, and the cultivation and growth of that seed is God's complete and infinite concern.

And that brings us to the second reflection on our passage for today. In response to Peter's illumination, Jesus says: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven."

The world-changing event that happened that day in the quiet district near Caesaria Philippi, the event that would free Jesus to begin his journey to the Cross, and that would set all of creation on its path to reconciliation with God the Father, was not what Peter saw in Jesus – it was what Jesus saw in Peter. He saw God planting the mustard seed of enlightened faith in Peter.

Earlier we spoke of the prophets of the Old Testament, and how their work was the result of having been possessed or touched by the Holy Spirit. Well, that's what Jesus saw in Peter that day; the gift of illumination had been given to Peter in the same way it had been given in the ancient past.

But now, and here is the important part, what Peter saw, through the power of the Spirit, was that this special gift would no longer be limited to the privileged few on special occasions for special purposes.

What Peter saw was that this man, Jesus, standing in front of him, was himself the gift of the Holy Spirit to the whole world, he was God, given to the whole world. The gift of that spirit, that breath of God, so rare in olden times, was now to be freely given to everyone, a transformation realized and made manifest after the resurrection and ascension of Christ, at Pentecost.

And what does that mean for us? Well, many things, but here's probably the most important. In our spiritual modesty, most of us, at least, would be prone to say something along these lines: I don't think I've ever been illuminated from within like the prophets or Peter, with that sudden experience of being possessed by the Holy Spirit.

And you'd be right, in one sense, but only because things have changed. What Peter saw that day was that Jesus himself is that illumination. It is no longer something we need to find in ourselves, or await as a special gift. It's standing right in front of us. If you have ever heard the words of Jesus, you have received the illumination of God. What was once a private source, a candle under a bushel, is now the very sun in the sky, illuminating the whole world. Our part is simply to open our hearts to that sunlight, and let it drive the darkness away.

And so our prayer for this morning, heavenly father, is that you help us to see Jesus as Peter saw him for the first time that day long ago, help us to accept fully and consciously here and today the gift of his illumination, help us remove the fences and barriers we have constructed between his heavenly and our own earthly spirits, so that, with the eyes of our heart enlightened, we may come to know the blessings Your Spirit holds for us, through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.