

08-24-08

Our reading today gives us a wonderful opportunity for reflection. We have today a gospel lesson that is a controversial one, because of the tension within the questions making them ripe as a bone of contention. We reflect on the early church having divided connotations, a 12<sup>th</sup> century assumption and an early protestant emphasis. The text is also a wonderful text for Ebenezer. Individual words are so very important here.

The gospel tells us Jesus has retreated to a northern mountain. The mountain place (probably Mt. Hermon) that Herod Phillip<sup>1</sup> has named to honor Caesar and himself. Here Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They give 4 **divided** answers. There is controversy enough in this first question and Jesus gives no blessing to the answer and quickly moves on to the emphatically set up second question, "But who do you say that I am?" The gospel writer indicates Simon Peter gave the answer for the disciples. Jesus' reply uses Simon's given name and his nickname. Simon Peter is blessed even if it is **Not** by his own reason or strength that he knows the answer. Jesus reminded him that it was **revealed** to him by the father in heaven. The father helped him. Hear it again.

*Simon Son of Jonah! ... he is addressed. And I tell you, you are Peter, † and on this rock † I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.<sup>2</sup>*

This naming of Simon Peter gives us a deep rich meaning to this narrative. "And I tell you, **You are Peter.**" In the English we miss the wonderful play on words. **You** are rock! The image of rocks is important in scripture. Like the rock on which a wise man built his house. **You are rock** and on this **rock** I will build my **church**. This word that is translated as *church* could also be *assembly* or *congregation*. More likely the later because a congregation can be a community assembled or a community disbursed; a spiritual building or church. Later The Reformation focused on *the rock* as **Peter's faith** rather than Peter. Ecumenically we have softened our stance to acknowledge Peter has an initial unique foundational stewardship responsibility. He was given the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. It was now his responsibility to open the gates for us.

We can hear the echo of the Old Testament scripture. Think about it. Reflect on it. Who do people say is God? We can look back to early in the history of salvation for urgency connected to this question. In Abraham and Sarah's day, people tried to determine *Who*

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<sup>1</sup> Son of Herod the Great inherited this territory

<sup>2</sup> Poetically, that is, the gates of death will not keep the church imprisoned.

*God is and who has sovereignty over all. Our Isaiah passage this morning reflects on this example. You heard Joyce read from Isaiah. Hear it again.*

*Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,  
you that seek the LORD.*

*Look to the rock from which you were hewn,  
and to the quarry from which you were dug.*

*2 Look to Abraham your father  
and to Sarah who bore you;  
for he (Abraham) was but one when I called him,  
but I blessed him and made him many.*

Before the written scriptures, the oral tradition struggled with this question. Who is God? Are gods confined to a territory or can our God go with you? In the territory of the Middle East in the time before the written scriptures, gods were worshiped in the various areas. When you moved you accepted a new god. When God called Abraham to a new land God continued with him. God was great enough to occupy all lands. Abraham and Sarah tried to decipher this.

Over the centuries there is much music and art that explores this dilemma; many marvelous drawings and mosaics drawn on walls, in tombs and on floors have tried to interpret the answer, they describe the three strangers with the promise who came to this aged couple and turned out to be God.

There is indeed a parallel to the Abraham and Sarah narrative. They entertained God unaware. Abraham and the community act in compassion and with hospitality; communing with God. That is their stewardship. With Peter there is a new rock community, not a replacement community.

In The early days of the church there were followers that gave different interpretation on many questions. Popular opinion continued to be divided. Later this passage from Matthew was used to support the papacy and unite the church. It was interpreted to be the founding of the papacy. The Protestant answer focused on *this rock* as **Peter's faith** rather than on Peter himself. Early written scripture tried to stabilize The Oral Tradition's interpretation with the answer in the written word. "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" Who do YOU say... ? The great humanist Erasmus encouraged silent personal reading of scripture. For personal eyes alone. Yet it is estimated that in that day less than 10% of the people could read. Now we can all almost universally read but many not chose to do so.

As the early church struggled with the question, some believers said **we are orthodox** or **we have the truth and others are heretics**. Of course **the others** said they were the true believers and everyone else was heretical. And finally following Eusebius' writings<sup>3</sup>, a canon or accepted list of scripture emerged. The Emperor Constantine, tired of the dissension in the church,

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<sup>3</sup> Bishop of Caesarea and historian, a confidant of the Emperor Constantine

urged the church to hold council. The Nicene Creed was written. Both questions must also be answered. You have no doubt noticed of two of our confessional statements one says, "We believe..." and another says, "I believe ..." It was the 4<sup>th</sup> C and the church had answered the question "Who do people say that I am?" The Rock foundation is a new community and Peter is the unique leader. Others will assume leadership after Peter's death but it is not a primacy passed on.

The Bible is the church's book and the church will not die because it remembers its **rock foundation**, Peter is its leader. Of course, not to the satisfaction of everyone. The passage continues to cause difficulty. The keys of the kingdom are a stewardship responsibility. Art almost always depicts Peter carrying keys that open the church. To let us inside.

Sometimes the divine disclosure, this insight, revealed by our father in heaven, comes in music. There are many hymns that could be sung that remind us of the *rock of our salvation, my rock and hiding place, the rock of ages, the rock in whom we trust, the anchor that is fastened to the rock, praise be the rock*. One such hymn is *Come thou font of many blessings*. The third verse speaks of **where** I raise an Ebenezer stone of help. **Where** I go to receive help and **where** I go to give help. When Jesus sought us as strangers his sovereignty was not revealed to us by flesh and blood but by our father in heaven. We are sought to reflect the presence and actions of God.

Once again, the rock image is important in scripture. We all know some rocks; our parents perhaps, or our teachers. Maybe, the likes of people we know who are the pillar and posts of a church. Solid Foundation stones. Ebenezer stones. A community of stone that we stand on, cling to, and build on. God calls the whole church. To quote our own Harold Park writing on the history of Ebenezer; this is an "unfinished narrative, a providential sign, a reminder that Ebenezer's history is not yet finished. The living God is present now, leading His people forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century." The question is a continuing one. How will YOU answer it? How do you reflect the presence and actions of God?