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By Trevor Williams

Introduction

This is the first of three occasions of Jesus showing his disciples that he must go up to Jerusalem, suffer, be killed, and on the third day be raised. Peter's statement that Jesus is the Messiah, is followed by the affirmation that this is the foundation rock for the Church against which nothing can prevail. Yet in the verses following today's reading Jesus says to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

Questions in preparation to read the text:

- What does this reading tell us about Jesus' public reputation?
 - What would it have meant for Peter to say, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'?
 - How would you describe Jesus?
 - Jesus tells his disciples not to tell anyone. What conflict did Jesus want to avoid?
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Text

Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 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. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Comment

'Who do people say that I am?'

Jumping to conclusions, exaggeration, glorification and demonization are all likely outcomes of the gossip of public opinion.

To give an opinion doesn't necessarily convey full understanding. In fact, as we shall see, Peter didn't understand the meaning of statement, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of living God'. The enormity of what is entailed in Peter's declaration is brought out in what follows. This is the rock, the foundation of the Church against which nothing can prevail. This is the key to the Church's agency to be an instrument of God's activity in God's world, forgiving, binding, loosening.

So why the secrecy?

What was Jesus afraid of?

What would happen if the truth about Jesus' identity got out?

The question of identity.

Who am I? Who are you? In conflict the focus on identity is sharpened – Are you one of 'them' or 'us'? That is the ultimate question in conflict.

Already 'Jo Public' understood that Jesus is in line with a succession of God's spokespersons, the prophets who challenged, comforted and guided God's people on the right path. There was something important and exciting about Jesus. His words and actions gave rise to wild expectations. For Jesus and for us, the question of 'identity' is both fundamental and contentious, known but not fully known at the same time. There is always something more to be learned about who the 'other' is.

The question of power

These are powerful words, 'whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' 'The keys to this will be given to you'. Heady stuff! Power is the capacity to make a difference, the ability to gain authority, significance and influence.

The location gave a context for how power would be understood. This exchange happened in Caesarea Philippi, the city that Caesar built. Clearly the ungodly rule of the Romans, subjugating God's people to servitude needed to be upturned. The people prayed that God's power would do just that. It is likely that Peter's heard the words of Jesus in political terms – 'I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven' – and a commission for Peter to be an instrument of liberating power on behalf of God. This could explain Jesus' reluctance to have his identity defined at this point. The popular understanding of 'Messiah' which Peter shared could not comprehend what was about to happen to Jesus. (Later Jesus rebukes Peter for sharing this view: 'Get thee behind me Satan!' V23). Jesus was choosing to reveal his true nature through his Passion and Resurrection, not through the political aspirations of his time.

Despite his glorious affirmation of Jesus, Peter had still a lot to learn about Jesus' true identity.

Response

Identity

1. Who do people say you are? Are they right? What would you want to add?
2. What is the story of how you received your name? What does that say about you?
3. Who do you say that Jesus is? Write down a statement as fully as you can. Now examine that statement and become aware how your life experiences and present context may have shaped what you have said about Jesus and how you have expressed it.

Power

1. What would you say in the greatest thing that you have achieved? What led you to choose this example?
2. What is your relationship with power? Power, can be seen as power over others – the keys of the kingdom can be interpreted in this way! How dominant is that concept of power in your experience?
3. What other sorts of power are there?
4. How would you describe the power of Jesus? Is there an invitation to you, in the answer you have given?

If in a group

Each person spends time on their own answering the questions above.
Then in small groups, probably no more than three, listen to how others have answered the questions.

What have you learnt about what we know about one another, and how much more we need to learn about one another? In conflict what happens to the rich tapestry which is the identity of the 'other'?

Prayer

God, who is beyond dogma, beyond words
Open our minds and lives to your love
that transformed by your living presence
we may be conformed to the likeness of your Son
in whose name we pray.
AMEN