



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, August 25, 2002
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

*Choral Eucharist
at 11am*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Saint Matthew 16:13-20
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SAINT PETER PART I – THE ROCK

[Jesus] said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...”

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The Gospel readings for both this and next Sunday are the first and second parts of Saint Matthew’s narrative of what is often called the Confession of Saint Peter at Caesarea Philippi. My sermons today and next week will be on Christ and Saint Peter as they confront each other over the matter of Jesus’ Messiahship and Peter’s discipleship.

As far as Saint Peter is concerned, we need to regard him in two ways. The first is Peter as a sort of representative disciple, a Christian Everyman. Every Christian generation since the first century has noticed this quality of Peter. We all find ourselves attracted to (and identifying with) Peter’s sincerity, his good intentions, his weakness and failure, and his capacity to repent and start again.

The second way to regard Peter is as an apostle, indeed the first and chief apostle. Here his representative role is also an archetype of Christian leadership, stemming of course right from the Roman papacy itself to bishops and priests of every kind to every sort of head pastor in every denomination.

I have been to Caesarea Philippi. It is an ancient ruin of a city in the far north of Israel which Ceasar Augustus gave to Herod the Great, whose son Philip rebuilt it, changing its name from Panion (it had been a shrine to the god Pan) to Caesarea Philippi. The site is on the southern slope of Mount Hermon at the source of the Jordan River, which draws much of its water from the year-round snow on the top of the mountain. The area is very rocky, with waterfalls, and evokes the scene where Christ took his apostles to put the question to them, “Who do you say that I am?”

The point of this sermon is that Jesus’ question is a perennial challenge to his Church, to those who call themselves Christians. It a question put to us. “Who do you say that I am?”

When Peter, speaking for the rest of the disciples, said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” he gave the true answer, but it was not an answer that came to him out of unaided reasoning. That is why Jesus grounded his blessing on the word, Son. Hearing Simon (for that was

Peter's given name) confess him to be the Son of the living God, Jesus says, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona, that is, Simon, Son of John, for flesh and blood (natural and unassisted insight) has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." That is to say, "My Father, that same living God, has moved you to this confession." Peter confessed the unique divine origin and nature of Jesus.

We join this confession every time we say the creed, which we will shortly do; in fact, every time we say "Jesus Christ our Lord," we make the confession. The challenge, however, is the *inward conviction* of the external form of words. It is one thing to go through the motions of religion in Church. It is another thing to be animated by living faith. Saint Paul encompasses both sides of this question, when he writes to the Romans, "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (Romans 10:9)

Actually, it is quite a thing to be able to say, literally or in so many equivalent words, "Jesus is Lord," on your own outside of the safe precincts of the Church. Speaking up or standing up for the faith in the world outside, at home, at work, or wherever the challenge comes, is not easy. This is probably what Saint Paul meant when he wrote to the Corinthians that no one can say "Jesus is Lord" without the Spirit of God. (I Cor 12:3) It takes both inspiration and courage to make the good confession when you are on the spot.

Simon Bar-Jona found that out, especially when the time came, at Jesus' trial before the high priest, for him to identify himself as one of Jesus' disciples. But I am getting ahead of myself. That is next Sunday's sermon, and it has to do with Peter, the Rock, becoming instead a stumbling block, when he was offended by Christ's cross.

For now, let us see that Simon Bar-Jona, who has confessed Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God, himself receives a blessing and a new name, a nickname, Peter or Cephas, which means Rock. What Jesus means is that Peter's confession is itself the bedrock of the Church, as in our first lesson from Isaiah, which spoke of looking to the rock from which we are hewn.

The Church is standing on rock when it confesses Christ. An individual Christian puts his life on rock, on solid footing (come what may) when he stands on Jesus Christ as his Lord. Christian leadership, of whatever people, nation, language or style, is solid, that is, has authenticity and apostolic authority, when it is based on preaching and ministering Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God.

The keys of the kingdom of heaven which Jesus entrusted to Peter, and through Peter to all apostolic leaders, involve the right ministration of the doctrine, discipline and worship of the Church; of exhorting and rebuking, of the sacraments, of the right use of the good shepherd's "rod and staff." All of this has no authority except in the name and through the power and after the example of Jesus Christ our Lord. That is why, here at Saint Thomas Church, we place ourselves verbally and repeatedly under the name, the power, the *ownership*, of Jesus Christ our Lord. This is the Rock on which this Church stands, and, as Jesus said to Peter, our confession of his Messiahship, his Sonship and his deity, keeps us alive, healthy, safe and sound. Here is Jesus' promise: On this Rock I will build my Church, and the powers of death, the gates of hell will not prevail against it. That life, health, safety and security are to be through Jesus Christ our Lord, the Son of God.

Oh- one last thing – Why then did our Lord enjoin the apostles not to broadcast the fact that he was the Christ? That is why you need to come next week – it has to do with the Cross of Christ.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.