



**August 27th**

# THE NEW SHOFAR

**I make this promise to all Christians – Peter's declaration of faith is the rock on which I will build you, my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it!**

## **Jesus keeps to his script: in Him scripture is fulfilled**

It would be a great disservice to Matthew's Gospel if we made Peter the main focus of our reflections on today's Gospel. True, his response to Jesus is faith filled, and given the overall picture of Peter up until Pentecost, comes as something of a surprise. He does indeed reap bountiful blessings as a result of his confession but that is still not the most significant part of what the evangelist and Jesus is proclaiming to us today.

But first of all, let us do a refresher on one of the most significant parts of biblical study and reflection. **Context is important.** Do not leave anything out when making our study or sermon preparations. For example, if I was examining a student on this section I would ask them the importance of this phrase... *Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples...* Is it a mere geographical note? Or, is it a part of the key Matthew provides for unlocking what is to follow? Because I am asking that question, I have already forewarned you that it is a vital opening phrase for what is to follow in the remainder of the narrative.

## **And where was Jesus proclaiming this message?**

He and his disciples are in Caesarea Philippi.

It is important to understand how the city was originally a part of Israel that was known as the region of Naphtali. It was an Israelite place, a part of the Promised Land given by God to the Hebrew people as a part of the Covenant He established with them. A God place. A Promised Land place. Despite its background in the history of Israel, the Romans changed its name to something that better meshed in with their own view of the world and their dominant role in controlling everything.

*"Caesarea Philippi,"* in the Greek means *"Caesarea of Philip."* That distinguished it from the older city of Caesarea, which was south and west of there on the Mediterranean Sea. Around 20 B.C. Caesar Augustus had given the town and its surrounding region to King Herod. Herod went on and built up the city, an expansion that included a temple of white marble honouring and celebrating the cult of the Caesar. After Herod died in 4 B.C., the region passed to King Philip, who further built up the place and renamed it *"Philip's Caesarville"* so as to flatter and honour his patron, Caesar Augustus.

This is the key opening point for the Gospel. Jesus and his disciples were in a place that proclaimed loudly the hubris and arrogance that was the politics and social justice of the time. It reeked of the way Augustus ran "the world" and how others could bribe their way to positions of power by cringeworthy kowtowing to the right people, to those who could advance their own aspirations to power.

This was the town where Augustus was worshipped as a god, where money, alliances and patronage governed what happened and who was in power. There was nothing righteous in

Caesarea Philippi Augustus, a place filled with political patronage, a city revelling in all things worldly. It was unashamedly about the kingdoms of this world.

With this kind of understanding of the opening phrase, we can confidently say how for Matthew, it was no coincidence that it was *here* that Jesus asked his famous question, *Who do people say that I am?* How does he compare with Augustus when the vast majority of the population are yearning for an enduring peace, meaning for life, the gift of healing and forgiveness and the guarantee of life eternal? ***Don't skip verse 13a.***

### **This question to Peter offers an alternative way of living in the world**

***Because*** Jesus is asking that particular question *there*, with its background of power politics and all that goes along with it, His challenge is transformed from being an idle question of curiosity into a loaded question bristling with implications. If he asked the question in a small village in another part of Galilee, it would be a very different question. Here in “Caesarville” the Lord is offering a much more powerful vision and challenge.

Jesus' famous question is flavoured with this background. When Peter gives his wonderful confession that Jesus is the Christ, there was more than a touch of revolutionary zeal in what he said. A modern equivalent is difficult to imagine. It could be like someone going to the Chief of the Commonwealth Police and yelling “bomb parliament house”. The response of the police would be immediate and overwhelming. Similarly with what Peter is saying here in King Philip's city dedicated to the Roman god Augustus. What Peter is declaring is that Jesus is the Christ, the Lord and Saviour of all the world, someone to whom Caesar himself had to answer. It was a shot across the Roman political bow.

### **Jesus is not a rival to Caesar or any form of worldly power**

Jesus knew deep in his heart that political pomp and circumstance, earthly splendour and glory were neither his destiny nor his goal. But it appeared to be a part of the expectation of many of his followers. His warning to the disciples in verse 30 to keep his identity a secret did not stem from some fear that they'd be arrested for sedition. Jesus simply did not want to get swept up in a political campaign in which he did not want to be a candidate for secular office. He was no rival to Caesar. His kingship was vastly different, as was the source of his power and authority.

### **Everything flows from our willingness to submit our lives to Jesus**

Peter, the disciples and every person on earth must at some time make the decision about who or what it is that shapes and dominates our lives. It is Jesus Christ the Son of God, or is it something of this world, or even our own selves with our strengths, intelligence and contacts?

What today's Gospel makes clear is that whatever power the Church has to forgive sins or point out sins; whatever ministry and responsibility it has for pastoral care and bringing the entire world to God, it all grows out from one thing alone: knowing who Jesus really is. If Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, as Peter said, then no matter how modest the church may look in any given time or place, no matter how imperfect the church always is, what we have at the core of it all is a power that outstrips the political powers that be in this world. We have a protecting force but also a gracious forgiving force that no one in the universe will ever be able to stop.

It is all up to us to choose, to be like Peter and make that profession, not just with our mouths but also in the way we live out each and every moment of our lives.