

“THE ROCK OF OUR CONFESSION”

by Steve Hammond, Sunday, February 10, 2019

Mark 8:22-30 at NFBC

//27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

28 They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

29 “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.//

—Mark 8:27-30 NIV

So Jesus moves along after discussing the bread, realizing his disciples have a serious blind spot when it comes to their seeing Jesus for who he really is. They see him do a miracle of feeding the multitudes, not once, but twice, and yet they still worry about having enough bread when they hit the road.

And then he comes to Bethsaida, on the upper north side of the sea of Galilee, and people bring to him an actual blind man. Can you see Jesus’ eyebrow rise up with a little smile forming at the corner of his mouth? Surely he sees an opportunity. He takes the man outside the village, so this is not for the eyes of the general public. But presumably the people who brought the blind man go with him and the disciples go with Jesus. So there is a small audience to witness what he does.

Not only does Jesus heal this blind man, but he does it in two distinct stages. The first stage is where the man can indeed see, but he doesn’t see clearly or completely. The second stage is where he finally sees things as he should. Later, in chapter 10, we will see Jesus heal a man blind since birth. There he heals the man with just a word, no mud, no spit, and the man sees clearly in an instant. But here, in chapter 8 at Bethsaida, Jesus has more than the blind man in mind. He is applying mud and spit on the eyes of his disciples too. He is going to get them to see in two stages.

And stage one is right around the corner.

Jesus travels beyond Bethsaida to the outer reaches of his homeland of Israel. He stops outside the Roman city of Caesarea Philippi, where the headwaters of the Jordan river are formed at the foot of beautiful Mt. Herman. The area is very fertile and attractive for making sacred places of pagan worship out of caves and niches carved into the rocks. There is one particular area where there was a temple dedicated to Pan and another dedicated to Caesar Augustus.

It's merely ruins now, but it was very popular in its day. The Romans called it the "rock of the gods." Jesus may well have called it the "gates of hell."

Somewhere in this vicinity Jesus gave his disciples one of his pop quizzes. **"Who do people say I am?" he asked them.** They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." And then he asked them his 'mud and spit' question. **"But what about you? Who do you say I am?"** With no sense of hesitation, Peter spoke up with a God-given insight. **"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."**

That latter part of the confession is recorded in Matthew 16:16. And I have referred to Matthew in order to fill in what Mark has left out. But why would Peter of all people, who is behind the Gospel of Mark, leave out the full confession? Why did Mark only have, "You are the Christ?"

We don't know. But we can know it was enough for what the passage is aiming to communicate. First of all, it's factually solid. And quite surely the term "Messiah" or "Christ" is more meaningful to Peter now than it was when he first started to follow Jesus. But, of course, it's not complete yet either. For we also know Peter is soon to get into a serious argument with Jesus over the prediction that this Son of Man, Messiah, has an appointment with death at the hands of the Jewish authorities. So is there another reason Jesus was pleased with Peter's confession, even to have a shortened version of it recorded in the Gospel of Mark?

Well, clearly Peter's confession here is in keeping with the blind man beginning to see. Blurry or not, there is light and truth to be appreciated in what Peter says. This confession of Peter that Jesus is the "Christ," the "Messiah," given the context, is saying Jesus is not only the long promised Jewish Savior, but Jesus is in stark contrast to the pagan deities and is even far superior to what everyone else is saying positively about him.

But I think there's one more thing going on here. This confession isn't to the world. It isn't to a panel of theological experts seeking to find a flaw in what is or isn't said. This confession is to Jesus himself. So, along with the confession on Peter's lips, Jesus is also very much listening to the confession of Peter's heart. We know the last thing Jesus wants is mere lip service, even to what is true. And we know Jesus' ability to see a person's heart is exceptional, to say the least.

In Matthew we see that Jesus attributes Peter's words to being given by "my Father in heaven" and not just from human wisdom. This word from Peter is a confession of insight tantamount to having eyes that see what they could not see just moments before. Real light and real truth. It is also quite likely an expression of Peter's miraculously touched heart, and not merely his head.

So now, look at Jesus' response. As Carl Bloomberg put it in his book *Jesus and the Gospels*, "Peter has just told Jesus who he is; now Jesus tells Peter who he is." (p. 323) Both will have more to say further along, but for right now, the truth of both of them is starting to be expressed.

In Matthew, Jesus says to him, after affirming Simon-Peter's words came from the Father, **"I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."**

Jesus really goes out of his way to play on the name he'd given Peter back at the first sight of him. "Rock." This is where Peter is really starting to live up to his name. This is solid. With this, *this* Jesus can work. With this type of material he can build his whole church. This rock is in complete contrast and opposition to the "rock of the gods" in the background of Caesarea Philippi and all the false beliefs represented there. Jesus knew Peter would be the one to lead the way in the following of Jesus. But until now, he would have been little better than the blind leading the blind. Now Peter is at least a half healed blind man, half way through his training to be faithful, clearly faithful, in his confession that will ultimately go to the world: that Jesus is the Savior the world needs.

I realize this passage is used by the Roman Catholics to say Jesus is making Peter out to be the first of all their Popes. But sadly, such an interpretation would rob the rest of the disciples and the rest of the church, including us, from seeing the importance of having our own hearts and mouths opened in the faithful and true confession of Jesus as the Christ. None of us are to settle for the blind uttering of lip-service to words of which we have no understanding. We, all of us, are to have our hearts and minds truly illuminated by the truth when we are asked to answer, "Who do *you* say that I am?" It may even start out blurry. But I can't see Jesus leaving that blind man only half healed, can you? And he would surely also bring a blurry start to a clear conclusion when it comes to our confession of Christ.

Also, those references to the keys to the kingdom and the binding and losing on earth and in heaven have nothing to do with Papal authority. That same authority, Bloomberg points out in Matthew 18:18, is given to the whole church. They have to do with proclaiming forgiveness, the extending of the Gospel invitation and the expanding of the Church.

18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

---Matthew 18:18-19

It's pretty clear from those verses that this authority goes all the way down to where even two or three are gathered in Jesus' name. In Matthew 18 it is in regard to bearing witness to sin and forgiveness between two brothers in Christ. In Matthew 16 it has to do with bearing a true and heartfelt witness to Christ and salvation itself. Peter's confession of Christ is the solid truth from a softened heart. And so, too, must be that of all the living stones the make up Christ's building of the Church.

So, of course, the question comes to us, each of us. "Who do you say that I am?" It is the central question embedded in Jesus' ministry to his disciples and eventually to the whole world. God would have us know him by our knowing him through his Son, Jesus. This is because God wants us to truly know him. Not just by name, not by facial recognition, not by someone else's say so. God wants us to know him person to person, heart to heart. And we simply can not do that without the light of God's heart being miraculously brought to our hearts through the work of Jesus.

So, we need to ask ourselves: Am I blind as to who Jesus is? Am I blind to the fact that he is working on me, maybe through some mud and spit? Or can I at least see the beginning of that miraculous work? Can I see any light at all? And people starting to look like trees walking around?

If you can see the start of that miracle, confess it to him from your heart. For this would be the most solid start. And will please Jesus, who will see it through to the finish.