

JOURNEY WITH JESUS.

B. THE AMBASSADOR.

14. Christ the Cornerstone.

Matthew 16:13-20. We come now to a significant development in Jesus' mission. In this his third year of ministry time was getting short and Jesus, far too organized to leave everything to the last minute, rather than preaching to large crowds, wanted to concentrate now on preparing his disciples for what lay ahead. By and large, Israel had rejected him, and so he retreated to Gentile territory once more, where he would have fewer interruptions to this important phase of his teaching. It would seem logical to Jewish thinking that the Messiah would reveal himself in Jerusalem, the hub of Jewish religion. But Jesus knew himself to be very different from the messiah of Jewish expectations; if people hailed him publicly now, they would try to squeeze him into the mould of their own thinking or, if he resisted, they would become disillusioned and hostile. So it was important at this stage to keep his messiahship a secret to be shared only by his own few chosen followers.

In fact it was significant that Jesus should choose Caesarea Philippi – at the opposite end of Palestine from Jerusalem - for this revelation. The area was scattered with temples of the ancient Syrian Baal worship, and a deep cavern nearby was said to be the birthplace of Pan, the Greek god of nature. That cave was said to hold the headwaters of the River Jordan, giving it great importance in Jewish history and the faith of Judaism. In addition, on a hill near the town there was a great temple of gleaming white marble which could be seen for miles around, built by Herod the Great who had dedicated it to Caesar. Later Herod's son Philip enriched and beautified it, adding his own name to the town – Caesarea Philippi, to distinguish it from the Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast.

So it was in this place, full of reminders of the pagan Syrian and Greek religions, redolent of the history of Israel, and pointing to the glory and might of Rome, that this little-known peasant with his small undistinguished band of followers, had the temerity to declare, "I will build my church." The prophecy of **Zechariah 6:13**, "It is he who will build the temple of the Lord, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne," was regarded as messianic. Jesus' consciousness of his own divinity shines out here with a dazzling light. Today millions across the world worship him as part of his church: what has happened to those other religions and powers?

Do you sometimes feel discouraged, that Christianity seems such a minor factor in the world today? Never underestimate the tremendous influence Jesus Christ has had throughout the world, down through the centuries, and still has today. In his own plan and time he will reign over all the earth.

There was a problem facing Jesus. After nearly 3 years, were there any followers who really understood him enough to carry on his work? Upon this fact depended the survival of the Christian faith. Hence Jesus had to test his disciples and prepare them thoroughly to carry his message to the world. He led up to it gradually by asking them what the general opinion of him was. In Jewish thinking, Elijah and Jeremiah were both forerunners of the Anointed One of God, and it may seem like a compliment to give that description to Christ; but in fact it was utterly demeaning to him. He was not the forerunner - he was the Anointed One himself.

And so he led them on to the next question, one of vital importance, one that must be answered personally by each individual who seeks a relationship with Jesus – "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" And we have Peter's answer that rings down through the ages – "You are the Christ (Messiah), the Son of the living God." We are used to that sentence now as we gladly echo it, but on that day, in that situation, it was a giant leap of faith for Peter. Up to that time, the general thinking in Jewish minds was that the Messiah would be human, like themselves. But to Peter came the ground-breaking, earth-shattering revelation that this human Messiah was also divine. No wonder Jesus called him blessed, for God Himself had given him that revelation.

The meaning of **Verse 18** becomes clearer when we know the Greek meaning behind Jesus' words. He said, "You are Peter" ("petros" meaning a small rock) "and on this rock" ("petra" meaning bedrock) "I will build my church." In other words, Jesus was saying, "You are a small rock and any man can move you, but the faith you have expressed in my Deity will ground you firmly in the bedrock of my Word which is immovable. And on that Word, which is eternal truth, I will build my church." The "gates of Hades" indicates the powers of death and all that is opposed to the reign of God. Jesus declared that these gates will never close on the new community, the church, to extinguish it, for he will defeat death and conquer Satan by building his church.

So, in Christ's risen power, the Church can be aggressive against evil. How aggressive is the Church today? Has "political correctness" weakened it into a toothless tiger? Jesus said "Blessed are the peace-makers", but often we are nothing more than "peace-keepers." How can the world respect an institution that does not truly believe in its own charter?

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven," Jesus continued in **Verse 19**, and of course we have all the jokes about Peter standing guard at the pearly gates! In that culture, it was the steward of the household who held the keys, and Jesus was in effect saying that in the days to come Peter would be the steward of the kingdom. Peter used those keys at Pentecost, opening the door to 3,000 souls and later, to the Gentile centurion Cornelius and his household. Later still, it was Peter's witness that made it possible for the Council of Jerusalem to open the door wide to all Gentiles. Today, we have those keys too: every one of us can open the door of the Kingdom to someone by telling them of Christ. In the rest of the verse Jesus is simply saying that Peter, the apostles, and us today, have the authority to announce (not determine) to their hearers their guilt or innocence according to the principles laid down in heaven.

We can imagine the excitement the disciples felt at this momentous teaching from their leader – he really and truly was the longed-for, hoped-for Messiah! What a message to proclaim! But that excitement had to be curbed, for then in **Verse 20** Jesus warned them to keep the secret to themselves. How frustrated they must have felt! Whatever reason did Jesus have for such secrecy?

Divine Strategy.

Matthew 16:21-28. For the first time, Jesus foretells his death – and for a reason. He had to forestall false ideas about the Messiah. The Jews of his day believed the Messiah would conquer the enemies of Israel and restore her to freedom. They did not expect that he would suffer and die, though it was ordained by God and foretold in the Old Testament. Jesus himself was the only one who had the wisdom, through the Spirit of God, to understand the Old Testament correctly, and the authority to interpret it correctly, knowing himself to be the Suffering Servant. But the disciples had to keep that information to themselves, because a misunderstanding among the wider circle of Jesus' followers (let alone his enemies) could only foster much misguided enthusiasm and so hinder his true mission involving his death and resurrection. It was his resurrection by his Father that would put the stamp of authenticity on Jesus' claim to be the Son of God: anyone could die a martyr's death for believing in a cause – only the Son of God could come back to life again.

And now Peter, flushed with the effect that his confession had made, took it upon himself to tell the Son of God his business - **Verse 22**. Sure, Jesus was the Messiah, but the Messiah was to usher in the new kingdom as a conquering hero: this idea that he was to die was quite incomprehensible to even his closest followers, who anyway were all jockeying for cabinet positions in this great new kingdom. Jesus saw through Peter's words yet another temptation of the devil to divert him from his mission. His rebuke was in stark contrast to his previous words of commendation: far from being a rock Peter was now representing Satan! He had his own ideas about the path Jesus should take: Satan, whose name means "adversary", is seen in any force that seeks to deflect us from the way of God.

With the best intentions in the world, we can make mistakes. It is sobering to think that with some slight misunderstanding of God's Word and purpose, we can discourage or deflect someone from

their chosen path of following Him. God has never promised that His will will be our most popular choice – only that for us who are serious about Him, it will be our only choice.

Jesus took the idea further in **verses 24-27**, where he expected his followers also to be prepared to die, to count their lives expendable in their service for him. To take up the cross is a tremendous challenge to us today, but unless we do, *we cannot be his disciples!* (**Luke 14:27.**) The cross is simply the big “I” crossed out, self-dethroned and God enthroned. “What good will it be for a man,” Jesus went on, “if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” The answer is nothing – yet Jesus gave his own life in exchange for our souls!

Jesus Transfigured.

Matthew 17:1-13. There followed another week of intensive teaching and then Jesus must have felt the overwhelming need to pray in solitude to his Father, judging from **Luke 9:28.** He knew that the Cross lay ahead of him and the human part of him had to make sure, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he was doing what the Father wanted him to do: he had to trust implicitly and obey wholeheartedly. Taking just his 3 closest disciples, Peter, James and John, he went up a mountain – most probably Mount Hermon, 2820 metres high and 22 kilometres from Caesarea – and as he prayed, God honoured his trust. He allowed just a little of His own glory to shine through His Son, and then declared that He was “well pleased” with him.

Did Jesus need this encouragement? Yes, as a human being, he certainly did, and God was well aware of that. During the preceding days Jesus had tried to talk to his disciples about his death but they were in denial and wouldn’t even listen. Anyone who has watched by a dying person can tell you that he/she needs above all to be able to talk freely and frankly about his/her coming death: the relatives usually can’t face that ordeal and deny their loved one that last blessing. That was how it was with Jesus. But God knew and understood, and sent 2 of His friends to lend Jesus a compassionate shoulder instead – Moses and Elijah. **Luke 9:31** says they were talking with Jesus about his death that was to happen soon in Jerusalem – not with sobs and sympathy, but in a positive way – “his departure, which he was about to *bring to fulfilment.*” And Jesus, looking at them in their glorified state, would be reminded that his dark road would lead him at last to such fullness of glory, beyond the faint echo of glory that shone from him even then.

It is highly significant that Moses and Elijah should be the ones to come. Both were great men who had met with God on a mountain, who had talked with God, and who in their God-given mission had experienced rejection and suffering. In this sense Jesus can be seen as the one in whom the pattern of Old Testament servants reached its ultimate fulfilment. Both had deaths shrouded in mystery, they were twin peaks of Israel’s religious history and they represented the Law and the Prophets. It was as if in Moses and Elijah, all history rose up and pointed Jesus on his way. In them all history recognized Jesus as its own consummation.

But while these 2 great men of God were an encouragement to Jesus, there was no way in which they could be his equals. When Peter mistakenly sought to lump them all together and build a shelter for each one, God responded quickly and sternly with a display of His own glory in the form of a *bright* cloud. It often happens that a cloud forms rapidly on the summit of Mount Hermon and just as rapidly disappears, but this was no ordinary cloud, as the disciples recognized at once. A cloud in the history of Israel always signified the presence and the glory of God. A cloud guided them through the desert (**Exodus 13:21, 22**); a cloud covered and filled the Tabernacle which was the centre of their worship (**Exodus 40:34**) and at the dedication of the Temple in **2 Chronicles 5:13, 14**, “the temple of the Lord was filled with a cloud ... for the glory of the Lord filled the temple of God.”

Then came the climax – the ultimate accolade from God to his Son – (**verse 5 in Matthew**) “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to *him!*” There is a strong emphasis in the Greek word, as if God were saying, “Moses and Elijah are not the equals of my Son: he alone must be honoured and followed far above any mortal man, greater indeed than the Law or the Prophets.” At

this rebuke the disciples were terrified, but the glorified Jesus, at this moment manifestly part of the Godhead, gently touched them and said, “Don’t be afraid.” What meekness! What majesty! Looking up, they saw only him, their Lord. And in this time of stillness they had the opportunity for contemplation, for wonder, for adoration, for awed reverence in the presence of God’s glory.

How do you picture God in your mind? Is he a Being too terrible to look at, unknowable, unapproachable, ready to mete out justice for any slip of yours? Or is he your Father, loving, kind, reachable, knowable, ready to forgive? We need to keep a balanced view of both the majesty and love of God, His justice and His mercy, His awesome presence and His fatherlike compassion – and never take Him for granted.

Down to Earth.

They started down the mountainside then, and the 3 privileged disciples must have been bubbling over with eagerness to share their exciting news – until Jesus forbade them to speak a word of it! The danger of messianic fervour had been increased by the appearance of Moses and Elijah and it was imperative that they keep silent until after Jesus had died and risen again, when the true mission of the Messiah – one that had nothing to do with politics – would be realised. The disciples were frustrated and puzzled: in the Jewish mind the Messiah would be preceded by Elijah, who would come as a great and terrible reformer, destroying all evil in preparation for the triumphant procession of the Messiah: where was he? Jesus pointed out that he had come, in the form of John the Baptist, but that, like Jesus himself, his way was the way of suffering and sacrifice. God’s way is not to blast men out of existence, but to woo them with sacrificial love.

Mark 9:14-32. This special time on the mountain top was over: now was the time for Jesus and his helpers to minister to the needy. They rejoined the rest of the disciples who were surrounded as usual by a curious crowd, among them some of the teachers of the law who were engaging them in a noisy argument. Seeing Jesus, the crowd swarmed over to seek his arbitration in the quarrel. A spokesman in the crowd explained that he had brought his son, possessed of a terrible, destructive spirit, to the disciples so that they could drive out the spirit, only to find them quite impotent in the face of his request.

Jesus must have groaned inwardly. Not long before, he had sent out those disciples with the power to preach, to heal and to cast out demons: what had happened to their faith? Had they lost their vision during those few days of separation from their Rabbi? Had they become caught up once more with the petty issues of this earthly life? “How long” he wondered aloud, “do I have to stay with you to keep your faith alive? Bring the boy to me.” So that the people would be able to see the power of the miracle he was about to work, Jesus asked the man to recount the boy’s history, which was a desperate one. From childhood he had been dumb, foaming at the mouth, gnashing his teeth, falling into fire or water and sometimes becoming frighteningly rigid. Urgently the father pleaded, “If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

“If you can?” Jesus seemed to repeat the words in utter astonishment. “Everything is possible for him who believes.” It was a question not of whether Jesus had enough power but of whether the man had enough faith. He had yet to discover that a person who truly believes will set no limits on what God can do.

Honest in his desperation the man replied, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” It was a prayer Jesus would never refuse: immediately he commanded the spirit to leave the boy. Having a last fling the spirit convulsed his young host once more and threw him to the ground as if dead. Jesus took him by the hand, raised him up and with a smile delivered him to his enraptured father.

Of course, the short-sighted disciples wanted to know why they couldn’t have done that themselves, and asked Jesus so in private. **Matthew 17:19-21** gives us Jesus’ uncompromising reply: “Because you have so little faith.” He went on to quote the popular idiom of “moving mountains” which simply meant solving difficulties. Faith as small as a grain of mustard seed, placed implicitly in God, would enable the believer to do the impossible.

Writing of this incident Barclay said, “Real religion involves both meeting God in the secret place and men in the market place.”¹ We need our “mountain top” experiences to deepen our relationship with God – and we need the humdrum day-to-day experiences to strengthen that relationship by exercise. It is good that the father held onto his faith in Christ despite the impotence of his followers: when fellow-believers let us down, we need to keep our eyes on Jesus and our faith steadily in him.

¹The Gospel of Matthew Vol.2, The Daily Study **Bible**, William Barclay, p.184. The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh.