

“Who Am I For You?”

8/27/17, St. Ann
Fr. Jim Plough

Today’s homily has two ingredients, geography and imagination. The geographical focus is on the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi, the imaginative focus is upon the question “Who do you say I am?”

In today’s gospel passage, Jesus took his disciples on a twenty-five-mile hike north of Galilee to a region outside of Jewish territory. Caesarea Philippi was a marble temple dedicated to Caesar Augustus, Roman emperor who considered himself a god. Philip the Tetrarch, son of Herod the Great, ruled that territory and had the temple constructed on top of a massive wall of rock, 100 feet high and 500 feet long. It was one of the most prominent pieces of landscape in all of Israel. Today, this region is part of the Golan Heights, strategically significant for the security of Israel.

In Philip’s time, hundreds of people carved niches into the side of the cliff and, in homage, placed statues of their pagan gods so they could be worshipped. Jesus took the time and effort to find the perfect place to ask his question. Jesus knew the importance of geography. In the temple above the cliff, Caesar Augustus reputedly asked the question “Who do you say I am?” People responded in a chorus “You are our divine emperor, standing above all the gods carved in niches below you.”

Transpose this scene to our own time and to Jesus’ question to us, “Who do you say I am?” The perfect place for us might be a vertical granite rock formation in Yosemite National Park, called El Capitan. This gigantic monolith extends three thousand feet from bottom to top and is internationally famous for photographers and climbers. El Capitan is far more impressive than the puny Caesarea Philippi, now only a nearly uninhabited archeological site.

In the event that California is too far for you to travel, visit instead Independence Monument in the vicinity of Grand Junction. It, too, is a favorite among photographers and climbers for its impressive wall of stone. Stand below it and listen to Jesus’ question to you “Who do you say I am?”

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I imagine he might hear a variety of answers, not all of them praiseworthy.

You are the one our parents believed in; we no longer have that gift.

We know you as the Son of an angry God whom we fear will condemn us for our misdeeds.

You are my cuddly friend who says just believe in me and all will go well.

This is post-Christian America; you are no longer relevant in our society.

You are the one I’ve studied about all my life; I want to know more about you.

You are the one I want to know and experience, not just know about.

You are the creation of early Christians whose Scriptures reflected what they believed.

You laid down your life for me; that is what matters. You are the unseen presence in my life on whom I depend. You are my Lord and my God.

Asked this question in the region of Caesarea Philippi, Simon responded “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Take some time today to station yourself below El Capitan or Independence Monument or in your favorite place of quiet. Listen. Be still. Then prayerfully tell Jesus what he means to you.