

Reflection for the Twenty First Sunday of the Church's Year

Where is Caesarea Phillipi and does it matter? Well, it is approximately twenty-five miles north of the Sea of Galilee, away from where Jesus has been preaching, healing and working miracles. The long return journey out of Jewish territory must have taken a good couple of weeks and it marks a turning point in the course of Jesus' ministry. To use a sporting analogy, it's half time and Jesus has taken his players off the pitch for a little rest and recuperation, in order to reflect on all that has happened during the first part of his ministry and to prepare them for all that is to happen in the second.

During this time with his apostles away from the crowds, Jesus starts to talk about his forthcoming suffering and death and how things are going to look when he is no longer with them. He brings in a new idea, the idea that he will build "*a church*", a community of followers, and, with the appointment of Peter as "*the rock*" on which he will build his Church, he starts to address the business of leadership following his resurrection. Today's appointment of Peter is associated with the highly symbolic act of entrusting to him "*the keys of the kingdom of heaven.*" In times gone by, the one who had the keys had great power; he controlled who went in and who went out. The whole household had to avail of his services just for life to go on. It was a pivotal position and demonstrates the significance of the role of Peter in Jesus' future plans. The importance of the person with the keys is demonstrated in today's first reading when Shebna, a high-ranking officer in the court of King Hezekiah, had abused his position as the holder of the keys and so he was to be dismissed. In a highly symbolic act his robe, sash and the key of the House of David are to be taken from him and given to a more deserving and worthy character, Eliakim son of Hilkiah.

Peter is singled out to receive "*the keys to the kingdom of heaven*" only after he has made his profession of faith in Jesus as "*the Christ, the Son of the living God.*". This statement can be seen as Peter's assessment of the first half of Jesus public ministry. Since his calling by the Sea of Galilee, he has been in the company of Jesus and all that he has seen and heard has brought him to the conclusion that Jesus isn't "*John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets*" brought back to life as some people seem to think. The strength of the conclusion he has drawn causes him to speak up and declare that Jesus "*is the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" This is the rock of faith which is to provide the foundation on which Jesus can build his church.

The place of Peter and his successors, the Popes, as the head of the church remains important today for an authentic connection with the life and ministry of Jesus and for the continuity of the church he founded. Amongst those who have held the office of Peter there have been some like Shebna who have proved themselves unworthy of the office but there have been many more like Eliakim and proved themselves to be true fathers of the people entrusted to them.