



## Commentary on Mk 8:27-35 for 24th Sunday in Ordinary time Year B

In the winter before his death Jesus Christ quite deliberately brought his disciples to Caesarea Philippi right on the border between Jewish and pagan territory. It was the religious centre for worship of the Greek god Pan. There was a pagan temple there together with a cave where a spring of water originated. It was in that place that Jesus chose to reveal his true identity as the Messiah, and the Son of God. Scripture scholar Ben Witherington has suggested that Jesus chose that particular location for two main reasons.

**Firstly**, the pagan temple of Pan contained various niches which had been cut into the rock, which contained statues of pagan deities, including one of the emperor Augustus. Augustus believed that if Caesar was a god then, as his heir, he was the son of a god. When Jesus asked the apostles, in that setting, "who do you say that I am?" Peter responded by saying, under the inspiration of God the Father, 'you are the Messiah, the Son of God.' This declaration clearly implied that unlike the other deities, including the emperor, Jesus was the one and only Son of God. As Scripture scholar Tom Wright has observed, Jesus was saying, "I am the reality, and these pagan gods are the parody."

**Secondly**, the place where Jesus brought the apostles stood at the base of a cliff where spring water flowed from the mouth of a cave. The pagans of Jesus' day believed that this was the entrance to the underworld where their fertility gods lived during the Winter and returned to earth each Spring. Therefore, when Jesus said to Peter "you are the rock," and there were many rocks nearby, "and on this rock I will build my Church, and the Gates of the and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Mt 16:18).

Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah on the basis of the great miracles that had happened. For Peter Jesus as Messiah was the wonder worker; Mark's Jesus, however, rejected such a view by putting forward his own view of himself as the suffering Son of Man. When Jesus spoke as the Suffering Servant about his forthcoming death, Peter said in a worldly spirit that he didn't want that to happen. In a way he was like the devil who Jesus had encountered during the 40 days in the wilderness. He had tried to deflect him from his vocation. So, Jesus said to Peter, who only moments before had spoken under the inspiration of the Spirit, "get behind me Satan," i.e., the "accuser" or "adversary."

Then Jesus went on to say that his disciples would need to live sacrificial lives of love like him by being willing to suffer persecution for the sake of righteousness, just as he was willing to do in accord with the will of God the Father. It is worth remembering in this context that the early Church spoke about the three forms of martyrdom, i.e., of witness. The three kinds are mentioned in the 8<sup>th</sup> century Cambrai homily, the earliest known sermon in Gaelic. "Now there are three kinds of martyrdom whereby willingly takes cross rather than having it imposed on them, namely by means of white, blue and red martyrdom.

- The white martyrdom for someone is when they part for the sake of God from everything that they love, e.g. by volunteering to go on the foreign missions as a nun who has taken vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.
- The blue martyrdom is when through fasting and hard work they control their worldly desires by means of such things as fasting, acts of self-denial and sacrificial love of others.
- The red martyrdom is when they endure a cross or destruction for Christ's sake, as happened to the Apostles when they persecuted the wicked and taught the law of God."

Notice that these forms of suffering are as a result of personal choice in order to conform to the will of God. Of course, Christians, like everyone else can suffer as a result of "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," as Shakespeare put it. Speaking about this kind of suffering St Paul said in Col 1:24, "I fill up in my flesh (as a member of Christ's mystical body on earth) what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church."