
WHAT OF LESS BEAUTIFUL SCENERY?

BY MICHAEL CARD

Whenever we speak of confessing “Jesus as Lord,” our minds inevitably go to Matthew 16 and what is commonly referred to as Peter’s “Great Confession.” Sometimes commentators call it the “Caesarea Philippi” confession, making reference to the place where Simon spoke those courageous and enduring words, “You are the Messiah the Son of the Living God.”

The cross was little more than six months away when Simon spoke the luminous words that were more than he knew. The Twelve have been with Jesus approximately two and a half years by now and yet still He must ask them who they think He is.

All of the Synoptics record that it was in the region of Caesarea Philippi that the exchange took place. Most commentaries mention the beautiful setting, with snow covered mountains that can be seen in the distance. (Few mention that the ancient city was called Paneas, after the god Pan who was worshipped there in a series of caves. In Jesus’ time there was a temple to Augustus there as well. So it was a thoroughly pagan as well as a picturesque place.)

They had reached a crucial place in the ministry. Luke tells us that Jesus prayed all night before the encounter with the disciples. It is a momentous moment. He is about to attempt to “undeceive” them all.

Out of the blue the question comes, “Who do men say the Son of Man is?”

There is no word that Jesus’ query rattles the disciples in any way whatsoever. They respond with the same rather lame list we heard back in Mark 6:14. Clearly people in general are confused about just who Jesus really is. But that is not what is really at issue now. Jesus asks the infinitely more significant question, “Who do *you* say I am?”

As usual, it is Simon Peter who answers for the Twelve. Listen carefully to his response. He does not answer the question as Jesus asked it. If he had, he would have responded, “*We say* you are...” But those were not the words he chose. No, without hesitation Peter confesses, “You are the Son of God.” Jesus had asked who the people said the “Son of Man” was. Peter is clear. The Son of Man is the Son of God, and He is standing before them in His simple worn out sandals with the beautiful mountains behind Him.

If Jesus had been looking for an indication that it was time to start the building of His church, this was the sign; the full confession from the mouth of his first true follower. It was a glorious moment for the church. It was the long awaited spark.

When we think of confession it is this moment, recorded in all the Synoptics, to which our thoughts fly. But this is not the

only such confession we have in the gospels. And for me it is not even the most significant one.

John is famous for leaving significant stories out of his gospel only to replace them with other, more significant, stories. He leaves out the Nativity and replaces it with the Incarnation. He leaves out parables and replaces them with the parable of the life of Jesus. In this case, he leaves out the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi and replaces it with a confession that not only takes place at a different location but more importantly, under completely different circumstances.

They were back home in Capernaum. Only the night before they had seen Jesus walking on the water and mistook Him for a ghost. The day before that He had fed the five thousand and the people followed them back across the lake hoping for another picnic on a green lawn. Jesus will have nothing to do with it.

There is a discussion with the crowd that grows in both tension and intensity. Jesus reveals that He is not just the bread provider, like Moses was, but is Himself the Bread that must be broken and consumed. His sickening and scandalous words cause an argument to erupt among the crowd, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” they hiss. Of all the places to have said it, Jesus spoke these appalling words in the synagogue, just one door down from Peter’s house.

The real turning point comes a few verses later when John reports that from that point many of the disciples left and followed Jesus no longer (7:66). This, for me, represents the real moment of truth. And if the truth is to be spoken then Peter will speak it.

His response, like the earlier confession, was occasioned by a question from Jesus which grammatically expects the answer “yes.” “You do not want to leave too do you?” He asks as a number of His disgruntled disciples slink away. In what can only be called loyal despair Peter responds for the others, “Lord, to whom would we go?” At this moment, if there were someplace else to go, some other messiah to follow, Peter would probably leave with the others.

But the Spirit in his heart tells him otherwise and just as in the other confession, the Spirit placed the words on his lips. There is no place else to go. That is the simple truth. Jesus is Lord in spite of the scandal, or perhaps because of it. That would have been enough for the moment, but Simon says more and these words make up the other significant confession.

“We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

It is one thing to confess Him in private, in a setting where all is well and the view is pleasing. It is something else entirely when the specter of scandal has raised its’ head and others are leaving in droves. When confession has a cost, it somehow means so much more. Later on Simon will indeed fold under such pressure in the courtyard of Caiaphas, but that dark moment is months away for now. And in the familiar setting of his own home “church,” Simon has been given the courage to confess in the face of rejection and scandal.

The point, if there must be a point, it that you and I will also someday face just such a situation. What will you do? What will I do? Leave with the disgruntled crowd? Or stay in the thick of paradox and mystery? For now most of us have only known beautiful scenery on our walk with Jesus. What will it be when the situation becomes otherwise?

