

## 2018 24<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY

Caesarea Philippi is a beautiful, fertile place in the North of Israel- almost on the Lebanese border. In Our Lord's day it was a Roman city. Few Jews lived within it. They felt most uncomfortable there because it was dominated by a huge pagan temple dedicated to Caesar.

The ruins of the pagan temple were transformed into a Crusader castle in the 1150's and these ruins are there today. Just down from the ruins, an underground river gushes out of a cave, marking the beginning of the River Jordan on its journey to the Dead Sea.

Almost for sure this is the place where today's Gospel incident took place.

Here the living waters of the Jordan begin their long, self-gifting journey bringing nourishment to the lush fields of Galilee. Exhausted from giving of itself, the River finally draws to its death as it flows into the Dead Sea.

It was from here at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus, the Living Water, began His final journey leading to His self-gift on the Cross in Jerusalem. It was a time of profound change for the Twelve. Up to this point they had seen Jesus as a great prophet, akin to John the Baptist and Elijah of old. But now their understanding had evolved and they had come to the belief that Jesus was the Messiah.

This precipitated a time of heart-wrenching conflict between Peter and Jesus. Peter believed that it was the role of the Messiah to lead the people of Israel out of their virtual slavery to the detested Romans into freedom as a sovereign nation. However Jesus, having pondered on the Suffering Servant Songs of the Prophet Isaiah, knew deep in His heart that the call to Messiahship was a call to redemptive suffering and death. Isaiah, 600 years earlier, had been speaking about the Messiah in our 1<sup>st</sup> Reading: "I offered my back to those who struck me, my cheeks to those who tore at my beard; I did not cover my face against insult and spittle. I set my face like flint."

It was Jesus' understanding that it was the Father's will for Him to preach a Gospel of love and mercy fearlessly in the Temple in Jerusalem even though this would lead to the Cross. Jesus' obedient love would bring about a whole new relationship between humanity and God. Jesus believed that the Messiah wasn't called to liberate Israel from Rome. Rather the Messiah was called to

liberate humanity from the rule of Satan. And this could only be done with a storm of perfect love and obedience.

And so at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus took the opportunity to tell the Twelve of what was about to happen. He made it clear to Peter and the Twelve that He, Jesus, fully expected to suffer and die in Jerusalem because the Gospel had to be proclaimed fearlessly. He knew that it would upset the powerful leaders of Judaism and provoke a murderous response.

If they wished to be His Apostles, they had to follow Him. They, too, had to be prepared to offer their lives and take up their crosses.

Peter- from his perspective- saw Jesus' determination to journey to Jerusalem without an army of Galileans to support Him as suicidal and totally foolhardy. He passionately opposed Him. Jesus' reply was a jarring: "Get behind me, Satan. The way you are thinking is not God's way."

The path Jesus would have taken from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem would have followed the narrow, windy Jordan River. It was a path to inevitable death. It is the path all disciples are called to follow.

This is done in reality at every Mass. For a few minutes beginning with after the Consecration at Mass, Calvary becomes present. We stand in spirit with Mary, John and Mary the wife of Clopas and gaze upon Jesus on the Cross as the Host and the Chalice are elevated. We are there. We unite our sufferings with His sufferings. And through Him, with Him and in Him we offer ourselves to the Father. We become a part of Jesus' redeeming action on Calvary.

And just as the Father transformed the defeat of Jesus' death into the triumph of the Resurrection, so God transforms our crosses into things of glory.

These are days of intense soul-searching for the Church. There has been great sin by some trusted leaders in our church community and terrible scandal has been given. We are being shamed without mercy by the media. But let us remember what Jesus said: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine let them renounce self and take up the cross and follow Me." Yes, these days, we are most certainly sharing in the Cross of Christ. We are being crucified. But we are also people of hope. We know that in days to come there will be new life. There will be resurrection when the Church will be renewed and become a Church which reflects the mercy and the compassion of the Risen Christ in a way it has never done so before. That is my vision and I'm sure it is the vision of Pope Francis and all people of faith as well.

