

Prevailing Against the Gates of Hades
Preached FCCW Virtual Service, August 23, 2020
Matthew 16:13-18 and Romans 12:1-8

The weather on this particular day of our Holy Land pilgrimage was uncharacteristically gloomy. Gray clouds hung ominously above us and the misty air dampened our enthusiasm for outdoor exploration. You couldn't have asked for better weather for a visit to the Gates of Hell.

In Old Testament times the place had been the site of a cult to the Canaanite fertility god, Ba'al. In a culture that depended on agriculture for its survival, fertility meant the difference between life and death. So, sacrifices to coax the favor of fertility gods were a means to improving the odds of a fruitful harvest.

Three centuries before the birth of Jesus, Alexander the Great had conquered the area, and imported his Greek culture and religion to the land. Numerous recesses cut into a stone ledge long ago as shelters for statues of various Greek pagan gods, still remain to this day. None of them though, are anywhere near as impressive as what was known as the "Grotto of the God Pan." This great cavern originally contained a spring that was so deep it was believed to be the Gates of Hades, connecting to the Underworld and the River Styx that in Greek mythology divided the land of the living from the abode of the dead.

A sign nearby informs visitors that ritual sacrifices were cast into the abyss within the cavern. If the victims disappeared in the water, it was a sign that the god Pan had accepted the offering; which was good news. If, however, signs of blood appeared in the nearby springs, it meant that the sacrifice had been rejected. That was very bad news. Of course, neither outcome was good news for whatever was being sacrificed for the good of those doing the sacrificing.

Just across from the Gates of Hades was a temple built by the Jewish king, Herod the Great. But this was not a temple intended for worshipping the God of the Jewish people. This temple was dedicated to the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus, who according to human decree, was to be revered as a divine being.

It was in this place, with its history of worshiping pagan idols and of powerful men who could get away with being elevated to godhood by human consensus, in the shadow of the Gates to Hades, that Jesus asked his disciples the question, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

“Son of Man” was one of the titles used in the Hebrew scriptures that referred to the Jewish Messiah, God’s chosen one to restore the kingdom of Israel to its former glory. That Jesus used the term for himself without hesitation tells us that those who knew him the most intimately recognized his legitimate right to that title. There was no confusion between him and the man-made gods around the Temple of Pan.

It was an intriguing question though to ask of a population made up of intermingled religious histories. So, it should not come as any surprise that the disciples’ response included a variety of perspectives. But, when Jesus followed up with the question, “who do you say that I am?” there was no debate. Speaking for the whole band of disciples, Peter’s answer was, “You are the Messiah. The Son of the Living God.” Jesus tells Peter that he is blessed. Not only blessed for recognizing who Jesus is—but blessed for the way he arrived at that conviction. “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.”

Jesus implies that understanding who Jesus truly is, is not something arrived at solely through human speculation or deduction. It is not a question that can be settled through a survey of popular opinions about him. Who Jesus is, is not a hypothesis that can be proved or disproved through scientific experimentation or historical research or any other discipline. It can only be determined by being spiritually receptive to a higher Truth. That’s how Jesus can say that his Church will be built upon the solid rock of belief in something for which human ways of knowing can offer no solid answer—only opinions.

Then Jesus told them that against a Church that is built upon such an unshakable foundation, even the Gates of Hades will not prevail. If you knew nothing about where Jesus was when he said this, one might assume he was just employing hyperbolic language for dramatic effect. But knowing that this conversation happened with the Gates of Hell right over his shoulder, gives his words a graphic sense of reality.

So far, Jesus has been correct. The Church *has prevailed* against many evils. Even if it has often prevailed erratically. It has both prevailed in the face of tyranny, and collaborated with tyrants. It has prevailed in the struggle for justice, and has been unjust itself. It has prevailed in the offering of healing and comfort to those who suffer, and it has been responsible for the suffering of others. So, the promise Jesus made to Peter and those disciples that the Gates of Hades would not prevail against the Church should not be a reason for self-righteous chest thumping at the mouth of those gates. But a cause of reflection and repentance over those times when the Church stood beside those who were throwing sacrifices into those gates.

Perhaps that is why, when the apostle Paul spoke to the Church of his day, he pleaded for them, “to not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” And he warned them, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” These words seem to echo what Jesus said about the difference between living according to what is revealed to us by “flesh and blood” and by living according to what is revealed to us by what can be discerned through an intimate acquaintance with the nature of God.

Conformity to the world that Jesus and the disciples encountered in Caesarea Philippi meant a transactional relationship to gods of human invention who needed to be appeased through the deaths of innocent sacrificial victims. A deeper awareness of the nature of God as it is revealed to us through the person of Jesus, creates a renewal of the mind that understands God’s will not to be a matter of our making sacrifices in an attempt to be acceptable to God, or to make a deal with God to get what we want. but in having faith in the sacrifice Jesus made of himself for us. It is about becoming Living Sacrifices by the way we live, following Jesus example.

To become a Living Sacrifice is not to see ourselves as martyrs or willing victims to who and what opposes God's purposes; but to respond to a call to become instruments in bringing the world around us closer to a reflection of God’s loving nature and God's intention of abundance for all. Living Sacrifices resist

conforming to the world by choosing to put compassion before competition; choosing to place healing ahead of having our own way, and daring to question and resist whatever tempts us towards thinking more highly of ourselves and our own desires than we think about the well-being of our neighbor. Living Sacrifices see the what is good for the whole body as a more compelling goal than what is better for selfish ambitions.

The question Jesus asked so long ago, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" remains as important now as it ever was. Now, as then, it is a question that can be answered in many ways. And, just as the response of those disciples that day in Caesarea Philippi mattered then, our response makes a difference here and now.

There are answers that give us permission to dismiss the authority of Jesus' teachings; that permit us to trust in our creating our own advantages and protecting our own privileges rather than placing our faith in God.

Like those who threw helpless sacrifices through the Gates of Hades, there continues to be a human impulse to improve the odds of one's own desires being fulfilled by treating others as disposable sacrifices. But, so long as there are those who are not conformed to the lowest nature of humanity because they have had a glimpse of divinity in Jesus, the Gates of Hades, however wide they may seem to have opened, will not prevail.

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