

*13Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." 20Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.*

Where does authority come from?

From the gun the policeman carries? Does might make right? Sometimes criminals carry bigger guns.

Does authority come from the biggest army? In Iraq some are using violence to call that into question.

Does authority come from logic and reason? Often logic and reason do not win the day.

Does authority derive from government? What of a government founded on a rebellion as was ours?

Does authority come from God? St. Paul made that claim in his letter to the Romans when he wrote: "There is no authority except from God and those that exist have been instituted by God."

What is the base – what is the foundation of authority for you?

Jesus and his disciples were in a city named for the authorities – Caesarea Philippi – a city named for Caesar Tiberius who ruled in Rome and named for the son of Herod the Great, Philip, who was at that moment king over that region. In that city Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"

And Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

To understand what Peter's answer meant, we need to know how the words he spoke were used at that time.

The Jewish people were awaiting a Messiah – a descendent of the mighty King David who would bring back the glory and power that David had brought to the people. In Caesarea Philippi Peter confessed that Jesus was that one. The Messiah, the Christ for Christ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word, Messiah. Peter was making a political declaration for Jesus – doubly so for in the coronation liturgy for Israel – Psalm 2 – the king was crowned with these words spoken on behalf of God – "You are my son, today I have begotten you." We believe every king of Israel was crowned with these words: "You are my Son, today I have begotten you." Peter confessed, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

So how did Jesus respond to this most dangerous, subversive confession of Peter? With these words: "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven."

Jesus was not only saying, "I think what you have said is true, Peter" – Jesus was saying, "God revealed this truth to you. Not your idea, not my idea – God is the authority behind me."

And then Jesus spoke some most remarkable words, “And I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

The name Peter means rock. Millions of Christians have understood that the authority that God the Father gave to Jesus was given to Peter and the disciples and has been passed from them through popes and bishops and patriarchs down through the ages to the present day. With the authority came the promise that the gates of Hades, the gates of death would not prevail against the church. I like the image of a battering ram – all people of all time locked up behind the gates of death and the church breaking down those gates and freeing for life all people through telling of Jesus.

Jesus also spoke of the keys of the kingdom of heaven – declaring that what Peter and the church did God would stand behind - authority, real authority, given to the church – authority to free people from bondage to sin and evil and death and authority to bring people into the very presence of God.

Now when the church of Jesus Christ remembers that all this authority is about saving people we are all blessed. But kings and armies and schoolteachers and policemen and women, pastors and bishops and popes, senators and presidents and prime ministers and governors can sometimes lose track of who they are to be serving with their authority. Even mothers and fathers sometimes lose track of who they are to be serving within their own home. Then though authority may indeed have been given by God, God is not being honored by its use.

I think of Pontius Pilate and King Herod, the brother of Philip, I think of Caiaphas, the high priest of God Chosen people. They all used their authority to bring Jesus to the cross. They called him what Peter did, but in a different spirit

“Hail, King of the Jews,” the religious leaders mocked. “This is the king of the Jews,” was the sign Pilate ordered to be hung above Jesus on the cross. But the highest authority, almighty God, declared Jesus Lord of all in raising Jesus from the dead. All earthly and religious authority was proved to be wrong and Jesus alone right.

What about today? How can you and I know who speaks with the authority of God? Is it enough that someone holds an office in the political realm or within the church? It is interesting that as Americans and as Lutherans and as Christians in every case our founding moments came through conflict with the authorities. Rebellion against the king of England, rebellion against the pope of Rome, conflict with the Roman authorities and the Jerusalem religious authorities each lead to a new vision, a new truth.

So how can you know who speaks for God? For right? For truth? I do not think it is enough to say that because I am ordained, that I do. Maybe it all depends on how authority is used. When authority is full of secrets and covering up, when the answer is repeatedly, “Because I said so.” When there is no dialogue or back and forth of

discussion you should beware. Jesus spoke with his enemies, responded to their questions, his authority does the same today.

Peter's confession was a confession about where he was putting his hope – in Jesus. When whoever is speaking encourages you to do the same you will not go wrong. For Jesus is your hope, today, and forever.