

Church at Home
Matthew 16:13ff
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Matthew 16. Jesus and his disciples are almost off the grid at Caesarea Philippi. Today it's known as Banias. People say the territory of ancient Israel, along The lines "Lands End to John o'Groats" was "Beer Sheba to Tel Dan". Jesus and his band of friends are way up North of Armageddon, about 5 kilometres beyond Tel Dan deep in the foothills of Mount Hermon.

At the time Caesarea Philippi was a considerable visitor site with a grotto, gift shops and associated . But its principal attraction, in a hot dry land, was water. At Banias Seismic movements have cracked open the hillside, and one of the sources of the Jordan, clean fresh and iced, bursts out of the rock at 20 cubic metres a second.

Banias has always been a key strategic place. In 200BC the Seleucids Fought a Battle here and gained control of Palestine. In 1967 Israel militarised the Golan Heights with the same result.

In the twelfth century Banias was the hideaway of a fanatical terrorist sect called the Assassins — the real original assassins. The locals called it Banias after Pan, with his cave above the spring. It controlled the route from Damascus to the sea.

In 1218 the Ayyubid Sultan Sharaf ad-Din al-Mu'azzam Isa, nephew of Saladin, took over from his recently deceased father the governorship of Damascus. Next year he reduced Banias to a village, moving its military centre to a new and mighty fortress nearby [7] Qalat Nimrud, finished after his death in 1228.

This key strategic location gave its occupier control of all the land. It still does. When the Israeli army captured the Golan Heights from Syria in 1967, Banias had just over 200 inhabitants. Its constant attraction, though continues to be fresh water.

So Jesus and his disciples come apart up here, we can guess for a cool drink and some rest, after hot and frantic months on the road hemmed in by masses of people. Everyone's talking about Jesus. Far from the madding crowd, as it were, in a key strategic location, he asks them some key strategic questions:

Who do people say that I am?

"Oh, say the disciples, turning to the more polite options, some are saying Elijah, some John the Baptist, or perhaps even, er... Jeremiah, you know."

Nobody, incidentally, thinks Jesus is just a very nice man. People who have actually met him take much more polarised attitudes.

Some are downright rude. His family thinks he's mad. The Scribes and Pharisees say he's evil, driving out devils by the prince of devils. They are already actively out to get him.

The local ruler, Herod, says John the Baptist — come back from the dead after he thought he'd taken him out. The common people say he's a prophet, a healer, a teacher.

All right, says Jesus. He turns to the people who are supposed to know him best, his companions on the road. "How about you? Who do you say that I am?" Embarrassed silence follows, broken by the man with the big mouth. "You are the Christ, the Son of the Blessed!" blurts out Peter. Powerful words. Blessed are you Simon bar-Jonas. Let this moment stand, [9] as the keys to the kingdom of heaven, the way in, the only way to open the door to what's really going on here. A few years later St Paul says "nobody can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit..." Peter's confession of faith is the root of the creeds we say in Church today.

So, in that spirit, who do we say Jesus is? [10] More, perhaps, than an idea, or a mere figure of history, or a mascot, or a hobby. This line of questioning takes us way beyond patronising, anaemic and weedy answers like a generally nice man or an interesting museum piece. They just don't stand up to the reality of this man as people experienced him.

So here is today's key question. Who do we really believe he is?

How far can we open our hearts and minds to who he might be, Fully divine and fully human, not one or the other, more but at the same time less than a superhero, not a hybrid, not centaur nor bat-man, but the human face of God?

What people find is that the more Jesus becomes real, the more the door opens and he becomes our hope and peace, inspiration and wisdom, the key who opens up everything.

Who do we really believe he is? And what are we doing about it?

Over to you.

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