

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO – CAESAREA PHILIPPI

In the north of Palestine at the foot of snowy Hermon stood the magnificent city of Caesarea Philippi. Philip, the tetrarch, had enlarged and beautified it and called it Caesarea, in honour of Tiberias Caesar. Philippi, from Philip, was added to distinguish it from another Caesarea on the coast. The city is interesting to us, not for its heathen memories, but for the presence of Christ our Lord in its neighborhood, and for the events that took place there one memorable day.

It was now about ten months before the Passion, and the Apostles had been in the company of our Blessed Lord for nearly three years. During those years their knowledge of Him had been gradually growing. At the time of their call it was very imperfect indeed, and even later, when, from His teaching and wonderful works, they had come to acknowledge Him as the Messiah, their belief as to who He was remained very vague. Like the rest of their nation they knew that the Messiah was to be a great Deliverer; they did not clearly understand that He would be God. And by minding only the glorious things foretold of Him by the Prophets, they had lost sight of the prophecy that He would be a Man of Sorrows.

It was time for our Lord to test the faith of the Twelve, to prepare them for His coming Passion and Death, and to lay the foundations of that Church by which men were to be brought to the knowledge of Him and of what they must do to save their souls. All this was to be done at Caesarea Philippi. What wonder that on the morning of the eventful day of which we are speaking He was found alone in prayer! When He rose from His prayer He said to the Twelve:

"Who do men say that I am?" And they said: "Some, John the Baptist, and other some, Elias, and others Jeremias or one of the Prophets."

Jesus said to them: "But who do you say that I am?" Peter, foremost as usual, answered:

"Thou art Christ, the Son of the Living God." Here was a glorious profession of faith, proclaiming Christ to be true God, equal to the Father in all things. Jesus said to him:

"Blessed art thou, Simon BarJona, because flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but My Father who is in Heaven. And I say to thee that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give to thee the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth it shall be bound also in Heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth it shall be loosed also in Heaven."

Thus, in reward for his grand confession, was Peter made the Vicar of Christ on earth. The other Apostles understood now why, on seeing him for the first time, their Master had called him a rock. As a rock keeps the house firm that is built upon it, so was Peter to keep steady and united the Church founded by Christ on him. And the gates of hell—the power

of the devil—shall not prevail against it. Because by the gift of infallibility, Peter and his successors, when they speak to the whole Church on matters of faith or morals, will be preserved from teaching what is false. But Peter is to be not the foundation only, but the Governor and Head of the Church. Therefore, as the governor of a city has the keys put into his hands, so has Peter received full power over the Church to give orders and make laws as he shall see fit. And Christ, the invisible Head of the Church, promises to confirm in Heaven the acts of His Vicar on earth.

Moreover, as the Church is not to pass away with Peter, but to last as long as the world, what is promised to Peter is promised to his successors to the end of time. Now that through their spokesman the Apostles had confessed their faith in our Lord's Divinity, He began to show them that sin requires expiation, and that this can be made only by suffering. Gently and gradually He broke it to them that He would have to redeem the world by bitter pains and a cruel death, but that He would rise again the third day. "And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the ancients and by the high priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."

They were horrified. It was so different from what they had expected. Why, it was only the other day that He was nearly being made King ! To be the Messiah and to suffer ! To be the Son of the Living God and to be killed ! It was more than Peter, with his faith in our Lord's Divinity, his reverence, his intense affection for Him, could bear. And—oh, what boldness!—he took Him aside and began to rebuke Him

"Lord, be it far from Thee, this shall not be unto Thee."

"Go behind Me, Satan ! because thou savourest not the things that are of God but the things that are of men." What tremendous words ! and from the lips that had just said: "Blessed art thou." Poor Peter fell back, dismayed, among his fellow-Apostles. It was a severe reproof, and showed the Twelve that no one must venture to dissuade the Master from going through the terrible sufferings that lay before Him. His Heart was full of His coming Passion. From this time He spoke of it often, and each time with greater fullness:

"The Son of Man shall be betrayed into the hands of men, and they shall mock Him, and kill Him, and the third day He shall rise again." Always at the end those comforting words. He never separated the Passion from the Resurrection, that the thought of our resurrection and of the joys of Heaven may support us in the troubles of this short life.

But the poor disciples could not take in either the trouble or the comfort that He foretold: and "they were afraid to ask Him," says St. Luke, so they used "to question among themselves what these things might mean." And there was more yet. Not only did our Lord foretell His own sufferings, but He now made it clear that the disciples must be like their Master and that through labours and trials of every kind they must follow Him into the Kingdom of Heaven—they and all who professed themselves His disciples. He was so

resolved that there should be no mistake on this point that He called the multitudes together with His disciples and said to all; "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me." These words sorely distressed the Twelve. To think of all their expectations coming to this—a suffering Messiah, and no end of troubles for all who followed Him! Their Master had pity on them, and to strengthen their faith and courage He gave them a proof of His Divinity and a foretaste of the reward prepared for them in Heaven when their trials here were over. It happened in this way:

One evening, a week after Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, He took Peter and James and John and went up into a mountain to pray. He loved the mountains. They lifted Him for a little while above this sad earth. He loved the majesty of their solitude, their stillness, their strength. He loved the tranquil glory of the midnight skies into which they rose. He was the Creator of the starry heavens above Him. He knew and controlled all that they contain. If one of His Saints exclaimed: "How dull does earth appear when I look up to Heaven," how did His glorious Soul pour Itself forth in admiration and praise as He knelt there amid the wonders of His own creation through those eastern nights!

And so this evening He went up the mountain, probably Thabor or Hermon, with His chosen three. It was getting dark when they reached the top and knelt down to pray. His companions watched with Him awhile, then, wearied with the labours of the day and the steep ascent, and drowsy in the strong mountain air, they fell asleep.

A dazzling light falling on their faces roused them. They woke and looked around. The Mount, the surrounding heavens, the earth beneath were lit up by a supernatural splendour. And there in the midst—the Source from which all that glory streamed—was their Master, so transfigured that His face shone as the sun, and His glittering garments were white as no fuller on earth can make white. The glory of the Divinity within poured Itself out upon His Face and Form with a brilliancy so intense as to transfigure even His raiment. He had laid aside the form of a servant and taken to Himself the majesty and splendour that became the Son of God. The Sacred Humanity was like a lantern enclosing a light too brilliant to be seen without a shade. In the Transfiguration the shade was withdrawn, and, for an instant, the Light of Light in its transplendent beauty was seen by men. And, behold! two men, Moses and Elias, appeared in majesty, and they were talking with Jesus of His decease which He should accomplish in Jerusalem. Here was a new wonder, Moses, the Lawgiver of the Jews, and Elias, the most marvellous Prophet of the Old Law, coming to pay homage to the Founder of the New Law, and speaking to Him, even in this scene of glory, of His coming sufferings and death. One of the accusations of our Lord's enemies was that He did not respect the Law of Moses. What would His accusers have said had they seen Moses on this night humbly waiting on Jesus of Nazareth as a servant on his lord!

The glorious scene before them so captivated the Apostles that they could only enjoy it in silent awe and intense delight. They listened to Moses and Elias speaking in admiration and gratitude to our Lord of His coming Passion. They heard His tender words in reply.

How long this lasted we do not know, but when the Saints seemed to be going Peter, in his vehement desire to keep them, cried out:

"Lord, it is good for us to be here, if Thou wilt let us make here three tabernacles, one for Thee, one for Moses, and one for Elias!" "not knowing what he said," adds St. Luke. Truly, not knowing what he said. It was a simple thought at which he must have wondered afterwards, that those three, resplendent with heavenly glory, could need a dwelling made with hands! And as he was yet speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and lo ! a Voice out of the cloud saying:

"This is My Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased: hear ye Him." And the disciples, hearing, fell upon their faces and were very much afraid. Overwhelmed by the awfulness of so much glory, they did not dare to look up till Jesus came and touched them and said to them:

"Arise, and fear not!" And they, lifting up their eyes and looking about, saw no one but only Jesus. The bright cloud had disappeared. The sky was dark as before, lit only by the distant stars. Moses and Elias were gone, and Jesus, gentle and lowly as usual, was bending over them and telling them not to be afraid. And, as they came down from the mountain, He charged them saying:

"Tell the vision to no man till the Son of Man be risen from the dead." St. Mark adds: "And they kept the word to themselves, questioning together what that should mean 'when He shall be risen from the dead.' " Poor Apostles! not their Master only, but now Moses and Elias had spoken of the Death that was at hand. And still they could not understand. Peter had wished that night of glory to last for ever. It was good for them to be there on the Mount of Transfiguration, he said. He did not know that this glimpse of Heaven was to prepare them to tread the Way of the Cross, and he little dreamed of another hill, a hill of shame, on which one of the three was to stand beside his Master before many months were passed.

The memory of that glorious night was graven deep in the minds of the Apostles. St. Peter, writing to the faithful thirty-five years later, speaks of what he had heard "when we were with Him in the holy Mount." And in the Last Gospel we hear St. John saying:

"And we saw His glory, the glory as it were of the Only-Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." His glory was shown to them that their faith might not falter at the sight of His shame, and that all who believe in Him may know that the Way of the Cross is the Way to Heaven, and that the sufferings of this short life are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to come.

Coming down from the mountain next morning our Lord found the nine Apostles who had been left behind, surrounded by a great crowd, and in a difficulty. A poor, possessed boy had been brought to them for cure, and they could not cast out the devil. How glad they

were to see their Master coming to their help. And there was another glad, too. The father of the boy came running to Jesus, and, falling at His feet, cried out:

"Lord, have pity on my son, because he is my only one. And, lo! a spirit seizeth him and he suddenly crieth out, and he throweth him down and teareth him. so that he foameth, and bruising him he hardly departeth from him. And I desired Thy disciples to cast him out and they could not." And Jesus said:

"O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you, how long shall I suffer you ? Bring him hither to Me." And as he was coming to Him the spirit troubled him, and being thrown down upon the ground, he rolled about foaming. And Jesus asked his father:

"How long is it since this hath happened unto him ?" But he said:

"From his infancy. And oftentimes hath he cast him into the fire and often into waters to destroy him. But if Thou canst do anything, help us having compassion on us." And Jesus said to him :

"If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth." And immediately the father of the boy, crying out with tears, said:

"I do believe, Lord, help my unbelief." And Jesus said:

"Deaf and dumb spirit, I command thee, go out of him and enter not any more into him." And, crying out and greatly tearing him, he went out of him, and he became as dead, so that many said:

"He is dead." But Jesus taking him by the hand lifted him up; and he arose and was cured from that hour. And when He was come into the house, His disciples secretly asked Him:

"Why could not we cast him out?" And He said to them : "This kind can go out by nothing but by prayer and fasting."