

Are you committed to a lifelong growth in your faith?

I remember a time when a member of the church leadership team in Uganda who was involved in offering pastoral care and comfort to people in need. This person whose pseudo name is “Jane” was active, influential and always offered valued support to the people.

However, there came a time when Jane had to be the recipient of support having lost a loved one. Her cry over her situation surprised the people. When asked about why she was behaving in such an unusual manner, Jane said her situation was outrageous, adding that nobody has so far experienced the agony she was going through. Everyone was surprised and wondered if Jane was well formed in ministry, whether she was faithful enough to recognise Jesus as the Lord as she had always offered comfort to people in need.

In our gospel, Jesus meets the disciples in the region of Caesarea Philippi, a historically significant site of revelation and commissioning. During the reign of King Herod, he re-built that site, and it became popularly known as the site where the gods bestow blessings upon the Emperor - the people’s agent of God’s purposes and will. The Emperor was revered at the time as the people’s god.

Our Almighty God however, rejected the Emperor who believes in false gods to be messengers of the Most High God. Caesarea Philippi therefore became a contested site where God decides to assert supremacy over the false forces that mislead the people into idol worship.

Jesus' questions to the disciples at this location was by no means incidental. The site is surrounded by rock, a physical reminder of what faith in Jesus means for his disciples, who would have known the significance of that site.

Jesus begins his survey by asking the disciples, who had been in constant interaction with the crowds, of what information they gathered from the public regarding his identity. Jesus hears himself being located in the prophetic tradition – the likes of John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah and other prophets. For prophets were characterised by judgemental sentiments against ruling authorities and often had their lives ending in persecution.

Having got them through the preamble, the brainstorming session, the matter gets intense. Jesus puts aside the people's opinion and confronts the disciples directly: 'Who do you say that I am?'

The disciples had witnessed Jesus' actions among them. Some including Peter were called after a miraculous catch of fish. They all witnessed and got involved in healing the sick and getting rid of the unclean spirit in Jesus' name. They witnessed the feeding of a multitude with a handful of loaves and fish. They saw Jesus walking on water, and Peter was invited to experience walking on the lake and every one of them witnessed the extraordinary event.

What more could Peter, the courageous disciple do. With the messiness and the troublesome nature of daily life, on his own, even in that significant site, Peter needed divine support to rise and make a bold declaration about Jesus: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (verse 16).

To protect Peter against being puffed up with pride, after making the correct confession, Jesus assures him it was out of the gracious help of His Father in heaven, who made Peter's right declaration possible. This kept Peter humble, within God's realm for the blessing. Indeed, Peter was not yet fully grown in his faith because we learn later in the gospel, he denied Jesus during his trials three times before the cock crowed.

The disciples had grown in faith, though not fully, born out of mysterious encounters with the Lord, leading Peter to recognise Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus for his part then bestows upon this son of Jonah, the new name, Peter which means rock, echoed also by the surrounding rocky ground they were stationed in.

Peter receives the authority of the Most High God. He gains power and authority over and above the Emperor and every earthly powers, being the authorised representative of God on earth. Peter receives the keys for heavenly access: "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (verse 19).

It was on the basis of Peter's faith in Jesus the foundation or chief cornerstone, that the church was built. The church has since then remained firm overcoming the previous centuries' trials or persecution to this day. In the midst of worldly attitudes, trials and temptations, the church thrives.

When all is well with us and we are asked who Jesus is to us, we can easily join Peter by asserting Jesus is the Messiah. However, when we are trapped in difficult life circumstances, our response regarding Jesus' identity might be different.

When I reflect on the time when my family and I were caught up in difficult moments of transition, uncertain about what our future holds, I don't think if I was asked at that time who Jesus meant to me held any significance. However, over time through experiences of God's grace upon my life during moments of personal trial, like Peter, I have grown up to recognise Jesus Christ as the Son of the living God.

Peter's confession did not come easily. He had encountered the ups and downs of life, the very turbulences we go through. The invitation for us is to commit to building our faith. Our heavenly Father who helped Peter recognise Jesus as the Messiah, will do the same to us, graciously transforming us to be living stones for the building up of the church, to God's glory.

The Lord be with you.