

**21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
August 23, 2008  
4 PM Liturgy**

**J.A. Loftus, S.J.**

**Today's gospel story is one of the more pivotal scenes in Matthew's gospel, Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi. Some commentators have said that this story is like the fulcrum in Matthew's gospel, a high point towards which all the preceding life and ministry of Jesus leads, and from which his life moves to its inevitable conclusion in the journey to Jerusalem and his eventual suffering and death. It is, even in Luke's gospel, a significant moment without compare.**

**As Jesus says in the story, it is only by the grace of God, that for one blinding moment Peter "gets it right." He has the crucial insight into who this Jesus of Nazareth really is: the long-awaited Jewish Messiah and the Son of the Living God. Peter experiences a crowning moment in his life. He "gets it right"—not something of which poor Peter is always accused.**

**I always think of the little kid in a wonderful old Peter Paul and Mary song called "In Right Field." All of a sudden, without warning, a long fly ball simply falls into a kid's glove while he is just watching the dandelions grow in right field. "He got it!" And everybody applauds wildly.**

**But there is a problem here. The problem with the way we break up**

scripture passages for Sunday reading is that, often enough, we don't get the whole story. For example, in Matthew's gospel right after this marvelous scene-stealing demonstration by Peter, right after he really "gets it right" for a change, he "gets it terribly wrong" in the very next scene. It's where Jesus has to turn on him and say "get behind me Satan." Poor Peter "gets it terribly wrong" in the very next moment. Why? Peter doesn't think his insight will cost anything.

Peter thought that being the Messiah and Son of God was cool, that it meant nothing could go wrong, that there was no need to keep journeying to Jerusalem—especially given the dangers lurking there. He learned the hard way. He is called Satan by Jesus; only the Evil One suggests that faith won't have to be translated into sometimes painful action.

There's a lesson here for all of us on a spiritual journey. Every good spiritual insight, every gift from above that makes clean, clear sense, for a change, holds its opposite within. Peter learned the hard way, having a great insight—even a great and totally correct insight—still has to be translated into action. You have to know what to do with the insight. And that is often our weak spot.

St. Paul learned this lesson the hard way too. That's the only reason he

can sing so rhapsodically about how “inscrutable are his God’s judgments” and “how unsearchable are God’s ways.” And it’s how Paul can ask such seemingly innocent questions, like: “For who has known the mind of the Lord?” “Who has been the Lord’s counselor?” He knows the answer is, quite simply, no one really “knows” God that way.

God lives and breathes in unspeakable mystery. Always has, always will. And as often as we might “get it right” in talking about the experience, we will also “get it wrong.”

Some theologians have suggested that this is the real reason both Matthew and Luke in their stories of the Caesarea confession end the experience with Jesus urging his disciples not to tell anyone about it. Jesus knows that what is said will be at least as totally wrong as it might be right. Better to remain judicious and a bit cautious until one finds out what the insight might mean in the real world. What will I *do* with my insightful knowledge about who this Jesus really is?

That’s where Peter goofed-up. Even after he was just given the keys to the Kingdom. The story is a lesson in humility for us all.