

Reflection

Some years ago I was lucky enough to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land with my fellow priests from Romania. There are truly many beautiful places that are moving. These are places that one should not visit so much with the mind but with the heart. For a Christian it is very exciting to walk in the footsteps of Jesus.

I don't know if the same thing happens to you, but normally when someone visits a country, a city or a region they fall in love, they have a predilection for a specific place. For example, I have already visited some places here in England: Felixstowe, Ipswich, Bury Saint Edmunds, Norwich, London. But none of these places charmed me as much as... Stowmarket...

The same thing happened to me in the Holy Land, too. I fell in love with that region of Caesarea Philippi that today's Gospel spoke of. Located 40 km north of the Sea of Galilee and at the foot of Mount Hermon, Caesarea Philippi is the site of one of the largest springs that feeds the Jordan River. It was truly a special moment for me to arrive in this region. After four days in which I saw only desert landscapes with red rock that gave me the impression of a sunburned earth, I found myself in front of this region which was a spectacle of water and vegetation. The contrast between the desert land of almost the entire country and this northern region is impressive.

That abundant reservoir of water has made the area quite fertile and attractive not only for agriculture but also for religious worship. There is an impressive rock on top of which numerous temples dedicated to the pagan gods were built. The spring that emerged from the great cave became a pagan cult center for the Greek god Pan, the god of the wild, forest and meadow; of shepherds and flocks; of nature and mountain wilds; of rustic music and impromptus, and companion of the nymphs. The shepherds invoked him to protect their flocks. That is why later the city was called Panias and today because of the Arab influence known as Banias.

Pan was also the god of fertility and male sexuality and was dedicated to chasing through the woods nymphs and girls, seeking their favours. There is a legend that says that the god Pan fell in love with the wood-nymph Syrinx, when he was walking through the forests. One day, Pan chased her until he trapped her on the bank of the River Ladon. Syrinx asked the naiads for help, and they transformed her into a reed. When the air blew through the reeds, it produced a plaintive melody. The god, still infatuated, took some of the reeds, because he could not identify which reed she became, and cut seven pieces (or according to some versions, nine), joined them side by side in gradually decreasing lengths, and formed the musical instrument bearing the name of his beloved Syrinx, also known as the pan flute. Henceforth Pan was seldom seen without it, playing when passion and desire possessed him.

Like the seductive beauty of a nymph or of the enchanting whistles of a pan flute, this religious

center of Caesarea Philippi attracted lots of people at the time of Jesus. I don't know if it was a simple coincidence or an intentional decision of Jesus to reveal his divine identity in this religious centre that swarmed with gods. Either way, a modern Marketing Strategist would say: very well dear Jesus, a very canny decision. It is true, it is not easy to recognize Jesus in a world full of gods.

Also for us today. Sure, there are not the same gods of the time of Jesus but there are others who try to attract us with the same seductive force of a nymph or of the whistles of a pan flute. We could call these gods by these names: money, possession, reputation, selfishness, power, sex... and the list can go on.

In our world that is also teeming with gods, Jesus' question is justified: 'who do people say the Son of Man is?' And this question is not the most important either because in a way it is an opinion poll. The crucial question is the other: 'but you, who do you say that I am?'