Last Saturday evening I went to a concert by the Idan Reikal Project in Caesarea, Israel. The concert was held in the ancient roman theater built by King Herod the Great on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea more than 2000 years ago. The audience faced the water and when my eyes were not being blinded by the light show accompanying the music, I could see the moon shining on the water as it set.

Breaking into the moon’s reflection, the remains of a flat bedrock platform stretched out into the sea. Here Herod had built his palace. I realized that in the first century BCE, the most prominent view of the theater’s patrons had been Herod’s well-lit place rising just 100 yards behind the stage. Herod had designed his city by the sea to display the source of Judean power at that time, namely, himself.

A couple days later, I visited the remains of Capernaum, where Jesus headquartered his ministry for three years—just a generation after Herod’s death. At that time, it displayed no power at all. Capernaum was a poor fishing village. Its people were not impoverished but had little extra after food, clothing and shelter.

Capernaum today looks little like the ancient village. When I visited years ago, it was just a set of archaeological ruins. A partly reconstructed white limestone synagogue rose above the black basalt of what had once been the walls of houses along streets.

Long abandoned, stone had been the ruins’ main feature. Signs directed the visitor towards the synagogue or towards the remains of a church believed to mark the location of the house of Peter’s mother. The man who became St. Peter had grown up there and his mother allowed Peter, Jesus and his disciples to live there.

Without the signs, the ruins would have been unremarkable. Most tourists’ eyes turned automatically to the Sea of Galilee on whose shore the village sat. The lake which had provided the livelihood of those who had lived in the town, now attracted the attention of the visitors.

When I visited this time, the ruins had been transformed. The Sea of Galilee no longer claimed attention. Instead, as I approached, my gaze was drawn by a large, black stone “saucer” suspended on cement pillars above the village. Indeed, it dominated the view. The synagogue, the village’s ruins and the lake were all visible, but only around this building.

The Catholic Church owns the land on which Capernaum sits and this modern architectural structure is a chapel. When one climbs the stairs into the saucer-shaped building, one enters a round, western-style chapel. While there is an altar (and an organ) on one side, it is the chapel’s center that the building features.

From the entrance, the visitor looks down a few tiers, with pews on each one, to a glass-covered viewing area about 20 feet across. Under the glass, the center of the church commemorating St. Peter is visible. Of course, the fourth or fifth century church completely lies in ruins. It is only the archaeologically excavated and restored octagonal walls that are visible.

The saucer-shaped chapel suspended on strong beams thus directs the pilgrims’ attention to Capernaum’s source of power in today’s world. The chapel built by the Catholic church directs one’s gaze to St. Peter’s “house,” to the source of Catholicism’s leadership. After all, in Catholic belief the Pope is the successor of St. Peter.

While God may be the Church’s source of power, whether as Jesus the Son or as God the Father, the papacy constitutes the visible symbol of that power here on earth. Just as Herod the Great built his palace by the Mediterranean Sea to remind Caesareans of his earthly power, so the Catholic Church has built this chapel by the Sea of Galilee to remind visitors of the heavenly source of the Church’s strength.

See photo at: http://religion-today.blogspot.com

Caption: The modern, saucer-shaped Catholic Chapel at Capernaum. The chapel's center looks directly into the remains of Byzantine church commemorating the house of St. Peter.