

Scripture Reading for Sunday September 13th 2020

Matthew 16:13-23 (NIV)

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

¹⁵ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” ²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

1 Cor 1:21-25 (NIV)

²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Sermon: “So Right and Yet So Wrong”

Our reading today may be well-known - and possibly for all the *wrong* reasons, in that this passage has created tension between Protestants and Roman Catholics since the time of the Reformation! These frictions have eased significantly in recent decades due to scholarship and reforms: I’ll speak a little more on that later. However, all that is a distraction for this decisive proclamation by Peter concerning the identity of Jesus. It is something, as we will see, that Peter gets so *right* before, moments later, getting it so *wrong*.

Before we get in what was said by whom, we need to set the scene and Matthew, following Mark, places this conversation between Jesus and his disciples in a region named Caesarea-Philippi.¹ Location is important, ask any real estate person! So, what’s so special about *this* location? Caesarea-Philippi is about 40km north of the Sea of Galilee and had, in Old Testament times, been a site of pagan fertility worship to the god, Baal (or Ba’al). Later, in Greek times, it became known as Paneas because Pan,² the half-human-half-goat god, had been worshiped there in its famous grotto and spring. (The place was later renamed Caesarea by Herod the Great after he built a temple to Caesar Augustus there in 19 BC.³) Now the grotto is a large cave at the base of a rocky cliff, and within it is a deep precipice containing a large quantity of water.⁴ Animal sacrifices were thrown into the “bottomless” pool. It was perceived to be a wicked, sinful city and rabbis forbade good Jews to enter. It was in this seemingly “godless” location that Jesus asked his disciples: “*Who do people say the Son of Man is?*”⁵ (Incidentally, that title “Son of Man” is one Jesus frequently used to mysteriously refer to himself and it alludes to a popular apocalyptic vision from the Book of Daniel.⁶ It *is* significant, but we need not be distracted by that here.) Now Jesus is *not* fishing for compliments; he *knew* the answer to the question! This is simply a literary device to set up Peter’s famous confession of faith. So, what do the disciples say?

¹ See Matt 16:13-23; Mark 8:27-33. (Luke has this story in a nameless place: Luke 9:18-22.)

² Pan, the half-man half-goat god of fright (thus “panic”), is often depicted playing the flute and linked with lust and bestiality.

³ After Herod’s death in 4 BC it was made part of the territory for his son, Philip, who enlarged the town and renamed it after Tiberius Caesar and himself – hence Caesarea-Philippi. During the war of 66–70 A.D., Caesarea was the recreational spot for the Roman general Vespasian who began the siege of Jerusalem and then left his son, Titus, in charge to complete it when he himself became Emperor. After the fall of Jerusalem, Titus and his troops returned to Caesarea, where Josephus reports he had some of the Jewish captives thrown to wild animals. Matthew may have wished to emphasize that this significant scene took place in a setting with all these nationalistic and religious associations, Jewish and pagan. He brings the scene of Jesus’ confession as the Jewish Messiah into the shadow of Caesar’s temple where the later Roman destroyers of Jerusalem had celebrated their victory. (Matthew was written *after* the destruction of Jerusalem and so his *readers* would appreciate this added symbolism.)

⁴ And is one of the sources of the River Jordan.

⁵ Matt 16:13. Only Mathew has “Son of Man,” Mark and Luke simply have “Who do people say that I am?”

⁶ See Dan 7:13-14. See also Matt 9:6; 11:19. In Matt 13:40-43 not only is there a reference to the “Son of Man” but he cites Dan 3:6 and alludes to Dan 12:13; such literary connections are evidence that the Book of Daniel was well-known for Matthew’s readers. Influenced by this image, it was thought that God was reserving in heaven an actual transcendent being - the Son of Man - who would come *from* heaven at the end of history and inaugurate the kingdom of God. Indeed, all nations and peoples of every language would worship him and his reign would never end. This, then, has incarnational overtones! In which case “Son of Man” is, ironically, a theocentric title – rather than alternate name for a human being or a mortal, as used in Ezekiel.

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”⁷ Notice they *didn’t* say that the people perceived Jesus to be gentle, meek and mild – and the friend of outcasts and children; an all-around nice guy and a wise teacher! No, the people thought Jesus was more like one of those strident prophets of ancient times who stood up and fearlessly spoke God’s word against wicked and rebellious leaders. They saw Jesus acting as God’s mouthpiece against evil and injustice in high places. I think that’s a little surprising! I suspect Matthew was also addressing rumours that may have been in circulation. Jesus is *not* John the Baptist resurrected⁸; Matthew makes it clear that’s impossible because John baptised Jesus.⁹ And, no, Jesus is *not* the anticipated Elijah-figure who was prophesied as the forerunner of the Messiah; that was John the Baptist himself.¹⁰ But the people were partly right; Jesus is a powerful *prophet* who speaks on God’s behalf.

Jesus then asks the disciples: “But who do *you* all say that I am?”¹¹ And Simon answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”¹² Simon states that Jesus is much *more* than a prophet, he is God’s Anointed or Chosen One - or the *Messiah* in Hebrew, or *the Christ* in Greek. This is another profound *aha* moment. It follows that earlier incident where Peter walks on the water and - once Jesus and Peter are in the boat - Matthew tells us they worshiped Jesus, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”¹³ Even so, Peter has joined the dots and made the connection: if John the Baptist is the Elijah-figure, Jesus is “the One who is to come,”¹⁴ the Messiah himself! Note that the added phrase “the Son of the living God” is unique to Matthew and does not mean the second person of the Trinity – that notion came much later. The title “Son of God” is essentially synonymous with that of Messiah, and in 1st century Jewish thinking, that meant that Jesus was Israel’s rightful *King*. This is Peter’s powerful confession of the identity of Jesus, and remember Matthew has already told *his readers* this information in the very *first* verse of his Gospel!

The next three verses are unique to Matthew’s account and pivots from the identity of Jesus to the establishing of the Church. Jesus *blesses* Simon and then states that *God* has revealed that insight to you, Peter, for you did not deduce that from reason alone and no one else told you. Jesus then gives Simon a *nickname* – *Petros*, the Greek for Rock, hence Peter - a name that was *not* used in Palestine at

⁷ Matt 16:14.

⁸ Matt 14:1-2.

⁹ Matt 3:13-17. Moreover, Matthew repeatedly compares and contrasts John with Jesus – 3:2/4:17; 3:5/4:23; 3:7/23:33.

¹⁰ Matt 11:11-15; 17:9-13. According to the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophet Elijah never died but departed to heaven in a chariot (2 Kings 2:1-15). The death of Moses is reported, but no one knows where he is buried (see Deut 34). And in Jesus’ day there was circulating a belief that he too never died. It’s not clear why Matthew (alone) mentions Jeremiah specifically.

¹¹ Matt 16:15 – the “you” is plural.

¹² Matt 16:16. Note Mark 8:29 and Luke 9:20 do not have the added “The Son of the living God.”

¹³ Matt 14:33; Mark 6:51-52 omits that point! So for Mark (see 8:29), this confession is a remarkable revelation. See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Risky-Faith-that-Trusts-and-Acts.pdf> . (Eugene Boring sees Matthew’s account as ecclesiological rather than christological.) And remember the Transfiguration that Peter, James, and John witness is *yet to come* – Matt 17:1-8.

¹⁴ Matt 3:11; 11:3.

the time.¹⁵ Perhaps this name was inspired by the prominent rock formation that defines the grotto at Caesarea-Philippi!¹⁶ Jesus continues: “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven.”¹⁷ What does all this mean?

First, Peter may be the foundational rock, but it is *Jesus* who is building the Church – even in places, like Caesarea-Philippi, that have a reputation for moral corruption. And, as Stanley Hauerwas puts it, “Peter stands *within* the Church, not apart from the Church, and his task is to keep the Church true to its mission, which is to witness to the Messiah.” Second, “Hades” (or Sheol) is the *realm* of the dead, *not* a place of punishment. And “the gates of Hades” is a biblical expression that refers to the power of death; in other words, the post-resurrection Church will *not* need to fear even the power of death.¹⁸ Third, the “keys to the Kingdom” refers to the right to admit and exclude – hence the popular tradition that Peter is the doorkeeper of the Pearly Gates. (However, some caution is needed here, as Revelation 3:7 - borrowing from Isaiah¹⁹ - ascribes this function to the risen Jesus and, in John’s Gospel, Jesus describes himself as the Gatekeeper.²⁰) Sadly, we tend to see this image of Peter at the Pearly Gates as keeping people *out*. It would be better instead to see this as a commission for the Church to joyfully proclaim the Easter message that *opens* the door to life in the kingdom.²¹ Fourth, the reference to “binding and loosing” is unclear but likely borrows rabbinic terminology and refers to having doctrinal and disciplinary authority.²² As I mentioned earlier, these verses have been the cause of friction between the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. The Catholic Church has traditionally used them as their basis for the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. Protestants have counter-argued that it is Peter’s *faith* in Jesus the Messiah that is the foundation of the Church. In recent decades there is general agreement that *Jesus* builds the church on Peter as the foundation,²³ nevertheless, the position Peter held was unique and unrepeatable.²⁴ This need not be the reason for disunity that it once was!

Moving on, Peter’s proclamation on the identity of Jesus as God’s Messiah, the true King of Israel, is politically dangerous. Jesus therefore tells his disciples that, for now, they must keep that news a secret.²⁵ We might think that odd, but Jesus had his reasons. Later on, *after* the resurrection will be the

¹⁵ Matt 16:18; see also Mark 3:16; John 1:42. Note: the word “petrified” has the same Greek root.

¹⁶ See also Isa 51:1-2; 1 Pet 2:4-5; Matt 7:24 for other references to stones/rocks.

¹⁷ Matt 16:18-19.

¹⁸ See Isa 38:10; Job 38:17; Ps 9:13. Again, the location of Caesarea-Philippi may be important here.

¹⁹ Isa 22:22.

²⁰ John 10:3-16. Hence the Church responsibility and role is *not* to be pictured triumphalistically, but graciously.

²¹ It may well be that Matthew is reminding conservative Jewish Christians that Peter had the right to admit non-Jews into the Messiah’s congregation – see Acts 10.

²² It could also derive from exorcism which Satan is bound and the victim is released. Matthew here designates Peter as the Chief Rabbi of Christianity. Nevertheless, later on in Acts 15, it seems that the Chief Rabbi was James, not Peter.

²³ Contrary to Protestant view.

²⁴ Contrary to Roman Catholic view.

²⁵ Matt 16:20; Mark 8:30; Luke 9:31.

time to tell the world.²⁶ In other words, it is all a matter of *God's timing*.²⁷ Jesus then explains that “he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”²⁸ In 1st century Judaism, however, it was widely understood that the “Messiah” was as God’s anointed king and he would be a political and military saviour who would defeat Israel’s oppressors – the Romans - and establish God’s kingdom or reign.²⁹ Peter therefore responds, “*God forbid*, Lord! This *must not* happen to you!”³⁰ Despite the earlier mention of being “raised on the third day,” this did not sound to Peter like an appropriate victory for Israel’s Messiah. Jesus says to him, “Get behind me, Satan! You are *a stumbling block* to me, because you are *not* setting your mind on God’s interests, but on people’s.”³¹

Peter, following on from Adam and Eve, presumes to know better than God *what* God desires. Peter gets it so right earlier and now he gets it so wrong! That powerful phrase, “Get behind me Satan” likely means that Jesus perceived Peter as being Satan’s unwitting spokesman in attempting to convince Jesus that the way of suffering can be avoided. In other words, this was another temptation that Jesus felt he must resist.³² Peter the rock becomes Peter the stumbling stone.³³ God had a different agenda for his Messiah, one that differed from the popular expectation. Jesus’ mission is to inaugurate an alternative kingdom, a radically different way of exercising rulership and authority. Matthew has already explained what that looks like in the Sermon on the Mount, which begins with the Beatitudes. And Matthew, no doubt with the benefit of hindsight, saw the suffering of Jesus as a fulfillment of Old Testament scripture. This also shows that *we* too can misread biblical texts because we are blinkered by our own preconceived ideas, ones that are influenced by our cultural and religious expectations. And this applies especially to Church leadership. We too can get some things so right and also so wrong; Church History is full of such examples. And we can be tempted to build the church based on human criteria for success, in terms of numbers and financials budgets, and overlook quiet progress in lives being transformed.

²⁶ Matt 28:18-20.

²⁷ This caution is also fitting in light of the earlier death of John the Baptist, see Matt 14:1-12.

²⁸ Matt 16:21. Concerning “must,” Matthew does not explain the reason for the death of Jesus here, only that it is *necessary* as a part of God’s plan – see 17:22; 20:28. The suffering of the Son of Man is necessary – a (divine) *must* – rather than fate in the Greek sense; for Matthew, Scripture is being fulfilled. Put another way God is understood as the hidden active at work behind the actions of human beings. There is an element of paradox here between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility at work in the suffering and death of Jesus. Moreover, it’s not the Jewish people as a whole, but their leadership that is held responsible for the Jesus’ coming death – 27:24–26. The verbs for both “be killed” and “be raised” are in the (divine) passive voice, making it clear that Jesus did not rise on his own, but that his resurrection is an act of God. (See also Hosea 6:2.) Douglas Hare writes: “The function of this seems to make an important theological claim about Jesus: his death occurred as part of God’s plan of salvation. While the *narrative* function of the three passion announcements is to prepare the disciples, the *theological* purpose is to assure the readers, that the that Jesus’ violent death is not a meaningless accident of history but part of God’s plan and, second, that Jesus is not a hapless victim but a knowing and willing partner of the divine strategy.” (We may struggle with this logic, but that is beside the point! This is Matthew’s account, not ours!)

²⁹ This is evident in the conversation between King Herod and the Magi, where “King of the Jews” and “Messiah” seem to be used interchangeably; Matt 2:1-8.

³⁰ Matt 16:22. Literally: “May God be gracious/merciful to you,” hence, “God forbid” in idiomatic English.

³¹ Matt 16:23

³² See Matt 4:1-11.

³³ “*Scandalon*” in Greek; see also Isaiah 8:11–15; 1 Cor 1:21-25.

So, one thing to take home from this today is for us to be mindful of developing both humility and discernment, for we too may inadvertently think we know better than God. Being Christ's Church is an awesome responsibility; it's never easy and we too should expect to walk the path of suffering along the way. Let's remember also that scripture is not static; it must be reapplied to new situations. Just as Jesus reinterpreted the Torah in fresh and creative ways in the Sermon on the Mount, the Church has been given the Holy Spirit to interpret the teaching of Jesus (and the rest of the New Testament) in new and inspired ways for today's world and its situations and challenges. And we too can get some things so right and also so wrong. And when we get it wrong, we need to repent, apologise and, where possible, make amends and move forward. Let's not forget that *Jesus* is still the builder of his Church.

The second thing to take away today is that timeless question of Jesus: "Who do *you* say that I am?" The Gospel writers present their accounts of *who Jesus is* through their persuasive descriptions of events and conversations. They, like Peter, have become utterly convinced that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is – in Matthew's mind - not *just* any prophet; he is God's *unique* Chosen One and *through him* God has decisively acted and changed history forever. Do we *really* believe that? If we don't, we can get some things so right - and also be so wrong.

Let us pray.