

Who Do You Say That I Am?

Isaiah 51:1-6 | Psalm 138 | Romans 12:1-8 | Matthew 16:13-20

MATTHEW 16:13-20

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' ¹⁴ And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' ¹⁵ He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' ²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

INTRODUCTION

Who is Jesus? If you ask around, you will probably hear a lot of different answers. For Muslims, Jesus is a divine prophet. According to the ancient Jews, Jesus was a wise teacher and miracle worker. More recent understandings of Jesus, however, have been less charitable. For Reza Aslan, a sociologist, Jesus was a violent Jewish nationalist.¹ For John Dominic Crossan, a biblical scholar, Jesus was a peasant and political revolutionary.² And for Richard Dawkins, a biologist and agitator of Christians: "Accounts of Jesus's resurrection and ascension are about as well-documented as *Jack and the Beanstalk*."³ Perhaps we should send him a copy of the Bible? Either way, the question is an important one. Who is Jesus? This is the question at the centre of our Matthew reading this morning. And make no mistake: Who you believe Jesus to be is the most important thing you will ever have to decide. So, who is Jesus?

1. A PERSON

Before we look at the specific answers, it is helpful to note the context, particularly the location of this conversation. Jesus has taken his disciples on a journey to Caesarea Philippi—a somewhat long and challenging journey. They had been travelling in the predominantly Jewish territory of Magadan, and now trekked, by foot, some 25 miles into the region of Caesarea Philippi—which includes a more than 500-meter ascent uphill from the Sea of Galilee. It's the destination, however, that's especially fascinating. The city was called Paneas, and it was known for a famous grotto where pagans worshipped the Greek god, Pan. It was, before that, near the site of Dan, a tribal settlement associated with Baal-worship in the Old Testament. In Jesus's day, it was briefly Neronias, and had been recently renamed Caesarea Philippi in devotion to the Caesar. A temple was built to honour him as a divine king. We know from outside sources like Josephus that the various pagan rites continued in time of Jesus.⁴ And so, it is in this context, this diverse religious context, this context historically and contemporarily focused on various gods, divine entities, and semi-divine rulers, that Jesus turns the conversation. It is here that

¹ See Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Random House, 2013).

² See John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

³ Richard Dawkins, "Richard Dawkins: You Ask The Questions Special," in the *Independent*, December 4, 2006. See independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/richard-dawkins-you-ask-the-questions-special-427003.html.

⁴ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 423-424.

Matthew builds the drama of the narrative to a moment addressing the central question of identity: Who is this Jesus? Is he one among many who are worshipped in this place? Or is he someone else?

Throughout the Gospel, Matthew has been making a case for the identity of Jesus. And the disciples have been gathering all the clues to answer the question. As recently as chapter 14, as we saw two weeks ago when Patrick asked us the question about where we encounter God, these disciples recognized that Jesus was the Son of God.⁵ Yet, they still demonstrated a deficiency in their understanding in the reading last week, where they were once again scolded for their insufficient faith.⁶ It all builds to this very scene. They are asked who others think he is. And they answer: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets.⁷ They are not wrong, in some sense. Jesus is the ultimate fulfilment of the prophets. Yet, this understanding is also deficient. Like most of the world, they see him merely as a prophet. But who is Jesus really? Shockingly, it is Peter who arrives at the crucial realization. He blurts out: *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."*⁸ It is the first human declaration in this book that Jesus is the Christ—the messianic king who will exercise God's rule over his people—and the first human affirmation that Jesus is the Son of God.⁹ Both terms point to the divine kingship of Jesus.

Let me pause here and ask the question: What does this mean for us? I don't think it is mere coincidence that Matthew has described here a context that is quite like our own. We also live in a day of religious pluralism, with temples to this god or that one on every street. And we have made gods out of many things—money, power, love, satisfaction, prestige. We make idols of anything around us. Yet, we are here this morning. We are sitting in a Christian church. And we are now also confronted with that most fundamental question, just as the disciples were that day. Who is this Jesus? Is he merely a prophet—as the Jews and Muslims would have us conclude? Is he simply a miracle-worker? Is he, but one option in the panoply of religious possibilities? Is he a killjoy, the nagging conscience when we really want to have fun, the guilt that brings us to church on Sunday when we'd rather be out enjoying life on a sunny summer day? Or do we recognize him? Do we know him as the Christ and God that Peter claims he is? Our eternal future depends on who we understand Jesus to be.

2. A PROCLAMATION

Of course, the story does not stop with Peter correctly identifying Jesus. Jesus, possibly knowing Peter and likely worried that he might develop a little ego after this, responded: *"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven."*¹⁰ In other words: 'Way to go, buddy, but you did not get that answer on your own.' This is a profoundly funny moment as Jesus references both Peter's father, who shares a name with one of the more ridiculous and moronic prophets in the Old Testament—'your flesh and blood did not tell you

⁵ See Matt 14:22-33.

⁶ See Matt 15:10-20.

⁷ This is a point that Jesus, himself, makes in the Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5:17-20.

⁸ Matt 16:16.

⁹ We could trace the background of each term, including Jesus' self-designation—*Son of Man*—in Daniel chapter 7, where we see that the Son of Man is given a kingdom, an everlasting dominion; *Christ*, which is the actual term for Messiah in Psalm 2, where the Lord's anointed Messiah is revealed to be his king and his Son; and *Son of God*, again in Psalm 2 or 2 Samuel 7 where the promised king is called the *son* of God himself.

¹⁰ Matt 16:17.

this,' and his own father, in heaven. The source is important. Who Jesus is, is important. Why? Jesus goes on. "*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...*"¹¹ It is an odd statement, but it confirms the significance of this moment. Who Jesus is matters very much. And there is an important implication tied up in his identity. Indeed, it is one of the more debated ideas in the New Testament. And I don't mean debated in the sense of how scholars usually mean it, sitting around a table at a conference, like a bunch of nerds, politely discussing.

It's an actual controversy. It has divided significant portions of Christianity. And at the centre of it is what the *rock*—the rock on which Jesus is building his church—is. Indulge me for a few minutes. This is important because it affects, rather significantly, what the essential message of the Christian faith is. Traditionally, Roman Catholics have understood Peter to be the rock, and have based a doctrine of papal succession on it. This is observing a word play in that *Peter*, who Jesus just addressed—*Peter* (Πέτρος in Greek) is closely related to the word *rock* (πέτρα in Greek). If the foundation of the church is a person, Peter, then the faith is built around leaders. In contrast, the Eastern Orthodox Church and most Protestants have traditionally taken the rock to be the faith and the testimony of Peter, not the person, but the confession that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God. In this scheme, then, the faith is built around a message, a message stewarded by the apostles (as we shall see in chapter 18) and those in the apostolic succession (not papal succession) of ministry. As a lover of the Scriptures, this idea is very tempting to me.

There is also a third option, the one that I find most compelling. Jesus is the rock on which he is building his church. Listen to the language again: "*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.*" If Peter is the rock, the grammar is awkward. "*On this rock*" points away from Peter.¹² If Jesus intended us to understand Peter as the rock, you might have expected Jesus to say something like 'you are Peter and you are the rock on which I will build my church.' Likewise, while Peter certainly makes an important confession—it is not referred to, grammatically, as a confession. Neither is his faith referenced. This means there is no actual noun to serve as an antecedent for the *this* in Jesus's statement. More importantly, at no point in the Bible is the foundation of the church or the people of God portrayed as a statement that believers make. And even more importantly, as we will see next week, Peter's confession is limited in its accuracy. He will unmistakably demonstrate his ignorance as to its meaning and significance.

But even more so, we have already seen that the passage focuses on titles for Jesus—Son of Man, Christ, and Son of God. The grammar is also focused on Jesus—with repeated references to him, with repeated *I* statements made by him, with the whole rhetorical exercise of asking who people think he is, and with Jesus' peculiar statement that the church being built is "*my church*."¹³ Jesus is clearly the main character here. And, of course, Jesus already stated that he is the rock—the foundational stone—on which the church is built. We saw it back in the Sermon on the Mount, by way of a parable, that Jesus—the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets—and *his* teaching are the rock on which the wise man builds his house (in contrast to building a

¹¹ Matt 16:18.

¹² The presence of the Greek word ταύτη (οὗτος) is peculiar if Peter is meant to be the rock as Jesus is addressing Peter—we might expect something focused on Peter.

¹³ Matt 16:18.

house on sand).¹⁴ This idea is paralleled with slightly different language later in Matthew when we learn that Jesus is the stone that the builders rejected and that becomes the cornerstone.¹⁵ And by the way, Peter himself, in his first letter, makes the very same reference:

To you then who believe, he (Jesus) is precious; but for those who do not believe “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,” and “a stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.”¹⁶

The point is this: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and yes, the rock on which he is building his church. And because *he* is the rock, the one who is sovereign over life and death, it is not about succession, it is that his church will stand against the gates of Hades—an ancient metaphor for death, not hell. Death itself shall not overcome Jesus, a truth confirmed in the gospel itself—his death on a cross and glorious resurrection at the end of this book. Death cannot stop him. Peter, again, says as much in his first sermon at Pentecost: “*But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.*”¹⁷ We who are his church, who truly believe that he is the Christ, who join him in his death and resurrection, shall likewise not be stopped by death. And there should be no greater comfort in this *life*, as the insignificant and piteous idolatries of our lives fall away, and eternity comes into focus.

CONCLUSION

So again, what does this mean for us? If you have not yet made Peter’s confession—if you have not yet settled on who you think Jesus is—if you do not yet believe that he is the divine king, the Messiah and the Son of God, rather than merely a prophet, a peasant, or a political revolutionary, then please consider this most fundamental truth. Life and death depend on it. And if you have made this confession, then be encouraged. You are a part of it. Give yourself to living your life as a member of that most glorious body, the church. And know that even death shall not prevail against us, so long as we remain built upon the rock, Jesus the Christ, the Son of God. As the great English hymn writer, Edward Mote, wrote in 1834:

My hope is built on nothing less
than Jesus’ blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
but wholly lean on Jesus’ name.

On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;
all other ground is sinking sand,
all other ground is sinking sand.¹⁸

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, give us the insight of Peter, to know in our hearts and truly believe that Jesus is the Christ, your Son, who overcame death for us. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹⁴ Matt 7:24-27.

¹⁵ See Matt 21:42. Here, the word for *stone* is λίθος. This is consistent with the LXX of Psalm 118:22-23.

¹⁶ 1 Pet 2:7-8. Peter, like Matthew above, uses the word λίθος for *stone* and so is also consistent with the Psalm.

¹⁷ Acts 2:24.

¹⁸ Edward Mote, “My Hope is Built on Nothing Less,” 1834.