

Matthew 16:13-20

¹³ When Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter said in reply, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ Jesus said to him in reply, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. ¹⁸ And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he strictly ordered his disciples to tell no one that he was the Messiah.



Pietro Preugino, *The Delivery of the Keys* (c 1481–1482). Sistine Chapel, Vatican City | Public Domain

Context

A large part of the Matthean narrative is devoted, in part, to the tripartite question: (a) who is Jesus, (b) what does it mean to be his disciples in the light of his identity, and (c) what choices will you make because of his call. In previous two Sunday gospels we have seen these questions addressed in the pericope of Peter walking upon the waters (Mt 14:22-33) and the encounter with the Canaanite woman (15:21-28) – and both episodes move Jesus to comment upon the faith of the disciple. These stories serve as the immediate context for our gospel about Peter’s confession and what it will mean for him in his on-going role of discipleship.

Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah forms the climax to the long section of the Gospel which began in 4:17 with Jesus’ public teaching in Galilee. Along the way the question of Jesus’ identity has repeatedly arisen. Matthew has been clear from the beginning about Jesus’ identity – he is the one in whom God’s salvific purposes are fulfilled. From the beginning, Matthew has recorded the clear declarations of Jesus’ identity by God (3:17) and by the demons (8:29). But there is no record of any explicit declaration by Jesus of his role as Messiah (though of course much of the recorded teaching

points unmistakably in that direction). Mainly we have only the testimony of the people who witness his miracles and signs: frequent amazement of the crowd at his authority in word and deed (4:24–25; 7:28–29; 9:8, 26, 31, 33; 13:54; 15:31). This amazement has led to speculation if he is the son of David (12:23; the title is also offered to him by petitioner in 9:27; 15:22), which no doubt gave rise to the authorities' repeated demand for a sign to authenticate his supposed claims (12:28; 16:1). The messianic identity is heightened when John the Baptist pointed forward to a 'coming one' (3:11–12) and has tentatively identified Jesus in this 'Messianic' role (11:2–6),; all the while Herod confused Jesus' ministry with that of John (14:1–2).

People want certainty about Jesus and who he is before they commit to be his disciples. But even after all that Jesus has said and done, there is always one more sign that is requested (16:1-5) – and eventually the answer is “No.” The time for signs is over. It is time to decide.

In this situation it is time for the issue to be clarified, but it is significant that, in accordance with the principle set out in 13:11–17, it is to the disciples in private that the clarification is given, here and in 17:1–13. The crowds remain in a state of uncertainty, and this, as 16:20 will vividly show, is quite deliberate.

Commentary

This pericope is located in a section of Matthean narrative that portrays the formation of the church (13:53-17:27) in the midst of the continuing conflict with all levels of Jewish society that is leaning towards a growing rejection of Jesus as Messiah. This story forms the hinge of the section because after this Jesus will heighten his attention to the preparation of the disciples for their mission as a community once Jesus has died and resurrected from the dead. It will be a community who perceives and professes his true identity.

Crossing Over: A new theme emerges

A theme that began with Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman (15:21-28) continues with the geographical setting of the story: *the region of Caesarea Philippi*. Early in its history this location had been the setting of Canaanite worship to *Ba'al* and later a Greek temple to the god Pan (hence the name *Paneas*). Eventually it simply became a center of secular power under the Roman regency of Herod the Great and his son Phillip who renamed it after Tiberius Caesar and himself: *Caesarea Philippi*. Is the mention of the location just a geographical touch of narrative – Luke, the “geographer” of the gospel writers, does not mention the name – so one wonders why Matthew includes it. It is not clear, but perhaps Matthew wanted to emphasize that this significant scene took place in a setting with significant religious and secular meanings and associations. By doing so, Matthew crosses over to confront the pantheon of gods and the power of Caesar, with the true King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

But at the same time, this scene does not really cross over into new “territory” as regards Jesus' divine identity. While this parallel scene in Mark is the first time Jesus' divine identity is proclaimed by others and worship (homage) takes place, that is not true in Matthew. Jesus' true identity is not really new to the disciples who have heard Jesus refer to himself in christological terms, have understood it, and worshiped him as the Son of God (14:33). The breakthrough is not christological. Matthew is crossing over to begin to explicate the ecclesiological (“being church”) dimensions of the profession and worship. It is from here that there is a separation of the new community of believers in the Kingdom of Heaven from those who oppose and reject it.

Christology: Matthew's Portrait of Jesus

The Gospel according to Matthew accepts and uses the main Christological titles found already in the Gospel according to Mark, including Christ/Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, Rabbi, and Teacher. But in contrast to Mark, Matthew adds several new titles and emphasizes certain aspects of Jesus'

identity. Matthew's Gospel begins by identifying Jesus as "the son of David, the son of Abraham" (1:1), showing Jesus' Davidic/royal and Abrahamic/Jewish heritage, respectively. Throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is presented as "the New Moses" for the people of Israel, and is given a variety of other titles, including Emmanuel, Savior, Prophet, and King of the Jews. It is in this light that our pericope asks its two questions.

The First Question: *Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*

Clearly the local "buzz" places Jesus among the greats of Jewish religious history. Not only are all prophets, but all are already dead and thought to be resurrected or alive in heaven. Elijah was whisked away to heaven in a fiery chariot, Herod thought John the Baptist was already raised from the dead, and there were non-biblical accounts of Jeremiah resurrected. In other words, they place him in the cadre of prophets raised from the dead. The first question, more literally phrased is "Who are the humans saying that the son of the human is?" The Greek *anthropos* (human being, person; mankind; man – EDNT 1:100) is used twice in the sentence. There is indeed high praise in the "buzz," but there is not enough for their faith to crossover and grasp the real identity of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Second Question: *But who do you say that I am?*

The "you" in the second question is emphatic and plural. It was not a question addressed just to Peter, but to the whole community. As in the first question, the word "saying" is present tense = "continue to say" or "keep on saying." It is not a one-time declaration, but a repeated confession. Peter answers the question addressed to the whole group. In Matthew's narrative Peter sometimes represents the disciples, sometimes represents all believers, sometimes plays a unique role in founding the new community, and sometimes is just Simon/Peter. It is a valid question to ask which "Peter" is portrayed answering Jesus' question? Given the context of the verses that follow, there is something happening that is more than a simple, impulsive response. In this scene Simon/Peter is answering for and on behalf of the new community emerging from discipleship to Jesus

The Response: *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*

Many have written about the lack of a consensus among 1st century Palestine about the meaning of "Messiah." All that can be said with certainty, whether Messiah be king or pauper, "Messiah" was a word of hope connected to God's divine providence. Just what shape that hope would take was not clear – even to Peter, the one who had confessed it. By vv.22-23 it is clear that Peter's understanding does not encompass the idea of a Messiah who suffers and dies.

Up to v.16, the account closely parallels Mark 8:27–29. But in v.16 Matthew seems to add to Mark's narrative when he includes a further specification of Jesus' identity "*the Son of the living God.*" It is not clear whether that is a modifier to "Messiah" or a separate title. Most scholars hold that Matthew wants us to grasp that Peter's confession, despite the potentially misleading nature of Messianic language and Peter's own failure to grasp its practical implications, is telling us more. The addition goes beyond a merely nationalistic fervor to an awareness of Jesus' special relationship with God. The adjective *living* (which has a good Old Testament pedigree) may perhaps have been included to contrast the one true God with the local deities.

Jesus' Response: an emerging church

The disciples as a group had already received a blessing: "*But blessed are your eyes, because they see, and your ears, because they hear. Amen, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it*" (Mt 13:16-17). Here this blessing is for Peter alone, as the plural address of v.16 shifts to the singular of v.17: *Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah* – notably keeping the original given name.

But the problem is....

Peter. In the polemics of the Reformation two basic positions were staked out: (a) the reformed position that “upon this rock” refers to Peter’s confession and (b) the Catholic position that the expression refers to Peter and all his successors. Modern scholars, Catholic and reformed alike, take a middle position: the expression refers to Peter (leaving the succession question aside).

R. T. France [1985, 257] writes:

Peter has declared Jesus’ true significance; now Jesus in turn reveals where Peter stands in the working out of God’s purpose. And as Peter’s confession was encapsulated in a title, ‘Messiah’, so Jesus now sums up Peter’s significance in a name, *Peter*. It is not now given for the first time, for Matthew has used it throughout in preference to ‘Simon’ (which never occurs without ‘Peter’ until v. 17), and Mark 3:16 and John 1:42 indicate that it was given at an earlier stage. What Jesus here reveals is its significance. It was apparently an original choice by Jesus, for no other use of *Petros* (or the underlying Aramaic *kêpā*, ‘Cephas’) as a personal name is known before this; now he reveals why he chose it. It describes not so much Peter’s character (he did not prove to be ‘rock-like’ in terms of stability or reliability), but his function, as the foundation-stone of Jesus’ church. The feminine word for *rock*, *petra*, is necessarily changed to the masculine *petros* (stone) to give a man’s name, but the word-play is unmistakable (and in Aramaic would be even more so, as the same form *kêpā* would occur in both places).

France continues [257-8]

The word-play, and the whole structure of the passage, demands that this verse is every bit as much Jesus’ declaration about Peter as v. 16 was Peter’s declaration about Jesus. Of course it is on the basis of Peter’s confession that Jesus declares his role as the church’s foundation, but it is to Peter, not to his confession, that the rock metaphor is applied. And it is, of course, a matter of historic fact that Peter was the acknowledged leader of the group of disciples, and of the developing church in its early years. The foundation-stone image is applied in the New Testament primarily to Christ himself (1 Cor. 3:10ff.; 1 Pet. 2:6–8; etc.), but cf. Ephesians 2:20; Revelation 21:14 for the apostles as foundation

The developing church

Jesus’ words, “upon this rock I will build my church” (v.18) has also contributed to exegetical controversy. Some scholars hold this passage is a later addition and is not authentic, but betrays a later ecclesiastical interest in interjecting that later period’s hierarchy and organization onto Jesus’ words. This position is fading because of the realization that *ekklesia* (church) regularly translates the Hebrew *qāhāl*, one of the terms for the ‘congregation’ or ‘community’ of God’s people – a term completely appropriate to describe the emerging ‘Messianic community’ of the disciples of Jesus. How could there be a messiah without a messianic community?

The building metaphor is the natural one to use in connection with the name *Petros*, and does not demand the idea of a full-blown hierarchical structure – nor does it preclude its development. The new church/community of the repentant people of God was at the heart of John the Baptist’s mission, and was the necessary outcome of Jesus’ ministry, with its effect of dividing men according to their faith or unbelief. What is striking is not so much the idea of ‘building a community’, but the boldness of Jesus’ description of it as *my* church/community, rather than God’s.

The emerging church that lasts forever

Hades is the realm of the dead, not the place of punishment. The “gates of Hades” is a biblical expression (Isa 38:10) that can mean the same as the “gates of death” (Job 38:17; Pss 9:13; 107:18). In this case, the word translated “overcome” or “prevail” means “be stronger than,” and the meaning is that the realm of the dead, which no human being can conquer, is nevertheless not stronger than the

church founded on the rock, and the church will always endure to the end of history, accompanied by its Lord (28:20). Thus this text declares minimally that the church will never die. But “gates of Hades” may also refer to the portals of the underworld from which the powers of Satan emerge to attack the church, especially in the eschatological times (cf. the eschatological testing of Matt 6:13 and 26:41 and the dramatic imagery of Rev 9:1-11). Then the meaning would be that the church is under attack by the powers of evil, but will never be vanquished, because it is founded on the rock. In neither case is the church pictured attacking Hades. Once again, the two kingdoms stand over against each other (see 12:22-37). The church does not escape from the power of Hades, but participates in the struggle between the two kingdoms with the sure promise that the opposing kingdom symbolized by the powers of death will never prevail.

The Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven

Eugene Boring [346] writes:

For Matthew, each of these two kingdoms makes its influence felt by teaching. The "kingdom of heaven" is represented by authoritative teaching, the promulgation of authoritative *Halakha* that lets heaven's power rule in earthly things. The image of Peter with the keys is not that of the doorkeeper to heaven of popular piety and cartoons. As the next image makes clear, Peter's function is not to decide in the afterlife who is admitted and who is denied entrance to heaven; Peter's role as holder of the keys is fulfilled now, on earth, as chief teacher of the church. The similar imagery of Matt 23:13 and Luke 11:52 points to the teaching office, as does the introductory pericope Matt 16:1-12 and Matthew's concern for correct teaching in general. The keeper of the keys has authority within the house as administrator and teacher (cf. Isa 22:20-25, which may have influenced Matthew here). The language of binding and loosing is rabbinic terminology for authoritative teaching, for having the authority to interpret the Torah and apply it to particular cases, declaring what is permitted and what is not permitted. Jesus, who has taught with authority (7:29) and has given his authority to his disciples (10:1, 8), here gives the primary disciple the authority to teach in his name—to make authoritative decisions pertaining to Christian life as he applies the teaching of Jesus to concrete situations in the life of the church. In 18:18, similar authority is given to the church as a whole, and the way the last three antitheses are presented in 5:33-48...shows such application of Jesus' teaching is the task of the whole community of disciples, with Peter having a special responsibility as chief teacher as well as representative and model.

What kind of person...what kind of community

As we noted at the beginning, a large part of the Matthean narrative is devoted to questions: (a) who is Jesus, (b) what does it mean to be his disciples in the light of his identity, and (c) what choices will you make because of his call. Those are questions that could be asked of the community as well as the individual. Fr. Ronald Rolheiser makes that point well in his reflection “The Width of Our Ecclesial Embrace”

Nikos Kazantzakis once said “the bosom of God is not a ghetto, but our hearts often are.” So too, sadly, are our ecclesiologies.

In church circles today, both liberal and conservative, our ecclesiologies are often anything but inclusive and Catholic (“Catholic” meaning wide and universal). We are pretty selective as to whom we consent to worship with and to whom we will accord the grace and wisdom of God. We tend to pick our fellow-worshippers along ideological lines rather than along the lines that Jesus suggests and we are getting ever more fastidious. More and more within our churches the sincere are divided from the sincere and the old tensions that used to exist between denominations now also exist within each denomination.

Given all of this, it can be helpful to reground ourselves in a critical truth that Jesus revealed.

One of his most stunning revelations is that God does not discriminate: “God lets his sun shine on the good as well as the bad.” God, like the sun, shines on every kind of soil equally, fertile and barren alike. And if God showers love equally on the good and bad, then surely God showers love equally on liberals and conservatives, on the rigid and the fanciful, on those who are joyous and those who are bitter, on the politically-correct and on those less inclined to that kind of sensitivity, and on those who belong to our ecclesial set and on those who would prefer us dead. That’s a disconcerting thought, but such, it would seem, is the scope of God’s embrace.

Jesus says as much: “In my father’s house there are many rooms,” This is a statement about the width of God’s embrace, not about the architecture of a heavenly mansion. God’s heart, as revealed by Jesus, is a wide one, capable of embracing immense differences and carrying unbearable tensions.

That, I submit, is one of the major challenges to our churches today, to stretch our hearts, our theologies, our ecclesiologies, and our pastoral practices so as to be more in tune with the great truth of our founder’s revelation that in God’s house there are many rooms. Can we hold the differences among ourselves in patience, charity, and respect? Can we hold and carry more tension rather than always looking for resolutions that result in some being included and others excluded?

Raymond Brown, in his wonderful book on *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, traces out how the early church, immediately after Jesus’ departure, already struggled with many of the tensions we have today. The communities of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and Paul emphasized very different things than did the communities that followed John.

However, in the end, the church chose to canonize both of them, choose to accept different Christologies and different Ecclesiologies, and to carry the tension and truth of both. It chose to put these differences into paradox rather than opposition.

Brown’s words at the end of this fine book are ones that we, within every denomination and within every ideology within a denomination, might well take to heart:

He tells us the church’s decision to place the Gospel of John in the same canon as the writings of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and Paul was a decision to live with tension, to imitate God’s wide embrace. As Brown puts it, by choosing to keep both, the church “has not chosen a Jesus who is either God or man but both; has chosen not a Jesus who is either virginally conceived as God’s son or pre-existent as God’s son but both; not either a Spirit who is given to an authoritative teaching magisterium or the Paraclete-teacher who is given to each Christian but both; not a Peter or a Beloved Disciple but both. . . . This means that a church such as my own, the Roman Catholic, with its stress on authority and structure, has in the Johannine writings an in-built conscience against the abuses of authoritarianism. So also the ‘free’ churches have in the Pastorals an in-built warning against abuses of the Spirit and in 1 John a warning against the divisions to which a lack of structured authority leads. Like one branch of the Johannine community, we Roman Catholics have to come to appreciate that Peter’s pastoral role is truly intended by the risen Lord, but the presence in our Scriptures of a disciple whom Jesus loved more than he loved Peter is an eloquent commentary on the relative value of the church’s office. The authoritative office is necessary because a task is to be done and unity is to be preserved, but the scale of power in various offices is not necessarily the scale of Jesus’ esteem and love.”

In a time of much ecclesial quarreling, especially over authority, Raymond Brown reminds us that “the greatest dignity to be striven for is neither papal, episcopal, nor priestly; the greatest dignity is that of belonging to the community of the beloved disciples of Jesus Christ.”

Our ecclesiologies should echo that.

Notes

Matthew 16:13 *Caesarea Philippi*: situated about twenty miles north of the Sea of Galilee in the territory ruled by Philip, a son of Herod the Great, tetrarch from 4 B.C. until his death in A.D. 34. He rebuilt the town of Paneas, naming it Caesarea in honor of the emperor, and Philippi (“of Philip”) to distinguish it from the seaport in Samaria that was also called Caesarea. **Who do people say that the Son of Man is?:** although the question differs from the Marcan parallel (Mk 8:27: “Who...that I am?”), the meaning is the same, for Jesus here refers to himself as the Son of Man (cf. Mt 16:15). There are a number of later manuscripts that read “say that I the Son of Man is?”

Matthew 16:14 *some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.* These answers reveal something of the messianic speculation that existed in the first century. Herod Antipas had already superstitiously identified Jesus as John the Baptist, raised from the dead (14:2). The view that Jesus was Elijah was evidently based on Mal 4:5, which speaks of God sending Elijah before the eschatological day of the Lord (cf. 27:45–49). The speculation that Jesus was Jeremiah or another of the prophets is harder to explain (cf. 21:11). Perhaps the association of Jesus with Jeremiah is due to Jeremiah’s preaching of judgment and opposition to the Temple leaders of his day (cf. 2 Esdr 2:16–18; 2 Macc 15:12–16). There is also indication that Deut 18:15–18 was understood messianically by some Jews in Jesus’ day (cf. John 1:21, 25; 6:14–15; 7:40). These views of Jesus were positive, but they proved to be inadequate. The crowd may have viewed Jesus as a prophetic messenger of God, but as the ensuing narrative shows, their understanding was extremely superficial and fickle (27:15–26).

Matthew 16:16 *the Son of the living God*: The addition of this exalted title to the Marcan confession eliminates whatever ambiguity was attached to the title Messiah.

Matthew 16:17 *Blessed are you*: Some scholars hold this formula repeats that of the Beatitudes; others opt for a more prosaic translations of “good for you” or “congratulations.” ***flesh and blood*:** a Semitic expression for human beings, especially in their weakness. ***has not revealed this...but my heavenly Father*:** that Peter’s faith is spoken of as coming not through human means but through a revelation from God is similar to Paul’s description of his recognition of who Jesus was; see Gal 1:15–16, “...when he [God]...was pleased to reveal his Son to me...”

Matthew 16:18 *You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church*: the Aramaic word *kēpā*’ meaning “rock” and transliterated into Greek as *Cēphas* is the name by which Peter is called in the Pauline letters (1 Cor 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:4; Gal 1:18; 2:9, 11, 14) except in Gal 2:7–8 (“Peter”). It is translated as *Petros* (“Peter”) in Jn 1:42. The presumed original Aramaic of Jesus’ statement would have been, in English, “You are the Rock (*Kēpā*) and upon this rock (*kēpā*) I will build my church.” The Greek text probably means the same, for the difference in gender between the masculine noun *petros*, the disciple’s new name, and the feminine noun *petra* (rock) may be due simply to the unsuitability of using a feminine noun as the proper name of a male. Although the two words were generally used with slightly different nuances, they were also used interchangeably with the same meaning, “rock.” ***church*:** this word (Greek *ekklēsia*) occurs in the gospels only here and in Mt 18:17. There are several possibilities for an Aramaic original. Jesus’ ***church*** means the community that he will gather and that, like a building, will have Peter as its solid foundation. That function of Peter consists in his being witness to Jesus as *the Messiah, the Son of the living God*. ***The gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it*:** the netherworld (Greek *Hadēs*, the abode of the dead) is conceived of as a walled city whose gates will not close in upon the church of Jesus, i.e., it will not be overcome by the power of death.

Matthew 16:19 *the keys to the kingdom of heaven*: the image of the keys is probably drawn from Is 22:15–25 where Eliakim, who succeeds Shebna as master of the palace, is given “the key of the

house of David,” which he authoritatively “opens” and “shuts” (Mt 22:22). **whatever you bind...loosed in heaven**: there are many instances in rabbinic literature of the binding-loosing imagery. Of the several meanings given there to the metaphor, two are of special importance here: the giving of authoritative teaching, and the lifting or imposing of the ban of excommunication. It is disputed whether the image of the keys and that of binding and loosing are different metaphors meaning the same thing. In any case, the promise of the keys is given to Peter alone. In Mt 18:18 all the disciples are given the power of binding and loosing, but the context of that verse suggests that there the power of excommunication alone is intended. That the keys are those to the kingdom of heaven and that Peter’s exercise of authority in the church on earth will be confirmed in heaven show an intimate connection between, but not an identification of, the church and the kingdom of heaven.

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