

Matthew 16:13-20

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Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] Matthew 16, and I want to speak from verses 13 to 20, it's the turning point of Matthew's gospel. But it's also the single most important turning point we could ever come across in a discussion of religion.

The first time the question is asked is in verse 13. You can see it's asked in really general terms. Jesus asks, who do people say that I am? Who do they say the Son of Man is?

What's the word on the street? It's an out there kind of question. But the second time he asks a question in verse 15, the house lights drop, and the spotlight shines into their eyes, and Jesus makes everything far more personal.

And he says, what about you? Who do you say that I am? And I don't know what your own answer is to that question.

You don't need me to tell you that there's a wide variety of answers. If you look at the kind of various popular and theological works of recent times, you can find Jesus the intellectual, Jesus the Mediterranean cynic, Jesus the proto-hippie, Jesus the androgynous feminist, Jesus the clever messianic pretender, Jesus the peasant very revolutionary, Jesus the gay magician.

[1 : 25] There's a range of options out there about who Jesus is, who he was. And that's the question for us this morning. And whether you realise it or not, it is the most significant question that any of you will ever face.

I would go as far to say that your answer to this question will do more to shape your ambitions in life, and your career, and your marriage, and your family life.

It will shape your leisure, it will shape your retirement. It will shape even the way that you face death. More than any other question in the world. And that's before, isn't it, any thought about our eternal destiny.

And so the question itself, firstly, and then the answers that are given, and then the promises with which Jesus responds. Number one, the question. Up until this point in Matthew, we've had ringside seats.

And we've watched the way that the crowds have responded to Jesus at different points. And we've seen that the crowds have been filled with awe. They've been amazed at him.

[2 : 33] They praised the God of Israel because of him. And news about Jesus, well, it's spread like wildfire through the whole region. And some people have taken offence at him.

But up until now, Jesus hasn't put anyone on the spot like this. He's not asked them to nail their colours to the mast. But now it's decision time.

And from a purely historical point of view, the identity of Jesus is really fascinating. There's a poem that reads, All the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that have ever sailed, all the parliaments that have ever sat, all the kings that have ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man on this earth, as much as that one solitary life.

And if you want to know anything about the history of art, or the history of music, or the history of law, or the history of Western civilisation, sooner or later, you've got to engage with the question of who is Jesus of Nazareth.

But the question isn't just interesting. But it's also the defining question for the world's religions. When you ask who is Jesus Christ, and you're not asking the question about opinion, you're asking the question about objective historical fact, about a man who really lived.

[3 : 58] And each of the world's major religions gave a different answer. So if you look at Judaism, it will say that Jesus is a heretic. In Islam, he is thought to be a sinless prophet.

In classical Hinduism, he is one face of God amongst millions of others. In Buddhism, he is a truly enlightened man, but he's no different.

In potential for the rest of us. In popular culture, you could say, I think today, Jesus is a good man, a great man, a profound teacher, he's a charismatic leader, that sort of thing.

That's pretty much what our culture would say about it. But only in Christianity is Jesus accepted as God on earth. And that is important, because when I come to have a clear mind on Jesus' identity, I not only decide what I think of Christianity, but what I think of everything else.

And so, let me ask you, does the evidence point to Jesus being a prophet, but no more than a prophet? Well, if he does, well then Islam is right. And Christianity is definitely wrong.

[5 : 15] Does the evidence point to Jesus being a good man, but no more than that? Well, if that's the case, popular culture is right, and Christianity is definitely wrong.

But if we just suggest that Jesus is in fact unique, and not just a man, but more than a man, and not just a prophet, but the son of the living God, then by answering this one simple question, you'll have demonstrated, in this respect at least, that Christianity is right, and every other view of the world is inadequate.

So it's important historically. And it's really important when you're discussing the issue of world religions. And even when we come to Christianity, this is the key question.

I don't know whether you've, we've got anyone here, and they're looking into the Christian face, maybe for the first time, or they've begun to look into it. And probably if you're looking into Christianity, you've got thousands of questions about all sorts of things.

And it can be kind of very hard to know where to begin. Try and get your whole, your head around, a whole different way of thinking, a whole different view of the world.

[6 : 33] But actually, this question this morning is the best place to start. This question is the domino that sets all the other dominoes into place.

Work out what you think about Jesus, and who Jesus is, and it won't be easy, but sooner or later, you'll find that other things fall into place.

That's why in our evangelism, we want to talk primarily about Jesus, and who he is, and what he's done, because that is the big issue. You get that issue right, and other things will fall into place.

If Jesus is just a man this morning, then Jesus' opinion about your career, and about your sex life, and about your family life, it matters very little indeed. But if he is God, if he is the God man, then when he speaks to us about the suffering that we face, and when he speaks to us about the money that we have, and when he speaks about the meaning of life, well, we would do very well to listen. And so the question is absolutely fundamental. And if you're looking in from the inside this morning, make this your question before any others. What about me? Who do I say that Jesus is?

[7 : 57] Secondly, let's look at the answers. The question, and then the answers. Let's do it. And the first answer is spectacular, but inadequate. Spectacular, but inadequate.

Verse 13. Jesus came into the area of Caesarea Philippi, and he asked his disciples, who do people say the Son of Man is? That's Jesus' way of referring to himself.

They say, some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.

And we need to realize that these different possibilities that people are putting on the table, they are not disrespectful to Jesus at all.

They're not meant to be. These are the crowds bringing Jesus down a peg or two. In fact, by saying about these people, they are holding Jesus in the highest of the seat.

So John the Baptist is a national celebrity. He's the first prophet after 400 years of silence in Israel. He's the man that the whole of the area went out to meet.

[9 : 08] Elijah probably was the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. Jeremiah probably the most revered and respected. And so these three men, they are national heroes.

They're every bit as much of heroes to the Israelites as English heroes are from the past. Winston Churchill. King Arthur.

Lord Nelson. They are celebrated. They are revered. They are respected. And if you were to open a Sunday newspaper in Palestine and they'd written an article on the top ten heroes of the Jewish faith, you'd be pretty sure that these three would be at the top of the list.

And now the crowds have come to the conclusion that the ministry of the son of the carpenter is on a par with the greatest people in history. And they are saying, Jesus, we think that you are the one of the most defout, one of the most spiritual, and one of the most important men that God has ever sent into the world.

Bravo. And it's high praise. But even that level of praise does not do Jesus sufficient justice. So he turns to his disciples and he asks them, well, do you share the popular opinion?

[10:29] Do you? Or do you think something different? What about you? Who do you say that I am? And it's very, very personal. Jesus, Matthew, switches here to the present tense to make it more dramatic.

You is literally the first word of the sentence. You. What do you think? And it's really ramping up the intensity of the moment.

And the question is addressed to all of the disciples but it's Peter who's the first to speak. And Peter says, doesn't he, verse 16, you are the Christ.

The son of the living God. That's news. News for us as readers but not new news.

Five times in Matthew's introduction, in chapter 1 and chapter 2, Jesus is introduced to us as the Christ. Five times in chapter 1 and 2.

[11:34] But with one exception, the title, Christ, which means God's anointed king, has been absent since chapters 1 and 2. And so this is a key moment. For the very first time, somebody says out loud the truth, the voice, which they dare to believe.

the truth that has dominated Matthew's gospel up until this point. And there are two parts to Matthew's answer, Peter's answer. When Peter says, Jesus is the Christ, every word in that little clause matters.

And so he's saying, you, you, Jesus, and nobody else are the Christ. Christ, and you are the Christ. It's not, might be the Christ. You're not, could be the Christ. You're not, one day, you may well be the Christ, but you are the Christ, present tense.

And you are, the Christ. You're not, one among many, but you are the one and only. You are the only Christ. Christ. And Christ is not a surname, but a title.

[12:45] The Messiah, God's anointed king. The king of the universe. The one whom the prophets had spoken about. And whom God's faithful people have been waiting thousands of years.

The one who will bring in God's new age. You are the Christ. The second part of Peter's answer is no less significant in acknowledging Jesus as the son of the living God.

He's making a statement not just about Jesus' office, that he is the king, his role, but also about this person who he is. Are you right? That he's realised Jesus is not just the anointed king, but he is the divine and eternal son who alone knows the father and has come from the father.

And if this all sounds like, well, theology that uses fine words, but it's quite distant from real life, I want you to see that Peter's confession comes laden with deep and practical circumstances.

Consequences. And the key, which I've not really seen before, is where it happens. Matthew's quite keen on geography. And where did it happen?

[13:57] Look at verse 13. It happened in Caesarea Philippi. And Caesarea Philippi was right in the north of Israel. Right on the boundary line between Israel and the rest of the world.

Kind of overlook the rest of the world. And it's as if Matthew is nudging us. It's as if Matthew quietly is pointing us, isn't it?

To the end of the book, isn't it? Where all authority in every place is given to the Lord Jesus over everywhere. Do you realise he's saying what is about to happen?

But what is about to happen to the Lord Jesus is not of significance just for the people of Israel to one little group in the Middle East and one little place but it's for the whole world.

And Matthew's readers would have known what we're not so familiar with that Caesarea Philippi had been a centre of worship to the Syrian god Baal. There'd been a great temple there, a big temple and the Greek god Pan was worshipped there.

[15:09] And the city was called Panea. Not long before this time. But the city had been recently renamed to honour Augustus Caesar, the Roman emperor.

And to honour Herod's son Philip. And so in a place which used to worship Baal and was called Panea after the great Greek god and now would be renamed in honour and adoration of Caesar and Herod's son Philip.

Peter says it's in that region. In that particular place, Jesus, you are the Christ, the son of the living God. And his words come with inevitable religious and political traits because Peter is saying there, Baal is not God.

and Pan is not God. And Caesar is not God. And Philip is not God because Jesus of Nazareth, you are God.

And you are alive. And I hope that that begins to explain some of the relevance of Peter's confession. Because it's not just a little personal truth for me and you, but it is truly cosmic and global in its scope.

[16:31] because it announces that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. Perhaps it would help us to think of different places.

Where you're from. The Dutch theologian Abraham Kleiker famously said there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our existence over which Christ who is sovereign over all does not cry. Think of different people. Think that by the end of this century we're told that the global population will have reached 11 billion.

And whether or not that is right, every single one of us will belong by right to Jesus. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof and all who dwell in it.

And on a much more personal level you can think of the different parts of your life, couldn't you? Your ambitions. And your hobbies. And your me time. And your family.

[17:38] And your friendships. Here's Kuyper again. wherever man may stand, whatever he may do, to whatever he may apply his hand in agriculture, in commerce, and in industry, or his mind in the world of art and science, he is, in whatsoever it may be, constantly standing before the face of God.

is employed in the service of his God. And he has strictly to obey his God. And above all, he has to aim at the glory of his God.

And that's the inevitable implication of what Peter is. Of what Peter is saying. that if Jesus is the Lord of all, then he has to be the Lord of my all.

I'm thinking in those terms, it's added some real bites to Jesus' question for me this week. I've known for a while, 42 years actually, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

But do the details of my life reflect that? Does my diary reflect the Lordship of Christ, which means that Jesus is in charge, and Jesus is Lord, and Jesus is Father?

[19:04] The things that I choose to do with the time that is my own. Does my parenting, my bank account, my plans for the future, are they marked by the Lordship of Christ?

It's a little bit like a watermark, isn't it, on a banknote. You know a banknote, isn't it? And you hold up a banknote and there's a watermark in it. There's a picture of Jane Austen, isn't it, on the £10 note.

And so, how do you know whether it's a proper banknote? It's not so good, but you hold it up to the light, and you see there's a watermark of Jane Austen on one side, and the Queen on the other. Because the watermark shows that it's genuine.

It's authenticity. And so, the Lordship of Christ should be the watermark that runs through our life. It might not be immediately obvious to people, but actually, as they dig a bit of detail, and they see our lives in the light, they see Jesus Christ as Lord in everything.

It should be obvious in everything I am and everything I do, but what about you, Jesus says? What about you? Who do you say that I am?

[20:26] Have you got a compartmentalized little Jesus, isn't it? Jesus is certainly in the morning Sunday mornings, you're here. What about school? What about school those children and young people that are in school? Does the Lordship of Christ, do people see it?

Or is Christ, no, God of school? What about our work? What about our homes? And if Jesus Christ is not Lord of all, he's not Lord at all.

What the question for the answer? Thirdly, let's see the promises. It's only found in Matthew and he includes it to show us that Peter's confession is not only right, but it also is the foundation stone on which the whole church of Jesus Christ and his mission is to stand.

I'm going to come back to this again at another time. But there are three promises here. There's one promise about Peter, there's one promise about the church, and there's one promise about the church and the gospel. So first up, verses 17 and 18, Peter is given a unique role in the church.

Verse 17. You are the Christ and Son, the living God, and Jesus answered him, Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

[21:52] And I tell you, you are Peter, you are the rock, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Peter is given a unique role in the church.

The point of Peter's confession in verse 17, his answer in verse 16, it's not only telling us something about Jesus, which it has, but it's also telling us something about Peter. It's also saying, it's that only

God, the Father, can give the secrets to the kingdom of heaven.

We know that, don't we, because we've read Matthew's Gospel, chapter 13, has said that. Only God, the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, can open someone's eyes and help them to see who Jesus really is.

So when Peter gets it right in verse 16, it is proof that God is at work in him. And it authenticates him as someone who is fit to play a key role in the early days of the New Testament church.

Now, you will know that 16 and 17, if you know the Bible and you know church history, it's probably the most disputed verse in all of the New Testament. And there's an argument about which rock Matthew is talking about.

[23 : 07] And Roman Catholic commentators want to say, well, Peter is the rock himself. And that Jesus is here appointing Peter as the first in a long line of popes.

Protestant commentators have said, no, the rock is not Peter, but his confession of Jesus the Messiah in the words that he said. I think we need to look very closely at the text.

The verse is not legitimising the ongoing office of the papacy, the Pope. I can't see how you can get that. I can't find that in there at all.

But I do want to say, and I think Protestants will underplay this, I think it is clear that Peter is being given a unique role in salvation history. And that is what happened.

It was Peter who preached the sermon that led to the conversion of 3,000 people in the establishment of the church in Jerusalem at Pentecost. It was Peter who in Acts 10 when God poured out the Spirit on the Gentiles.

[24 : 17] It was Peter who was preaching along with the other apostles that Paul describes as the foundation of the church in Ephesians 2 with Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. So that doesn't mean that Peter never made another mistake.

It can't. We know Peter made lots of mistakes, don't we? He made plenty. It doesn't mean that Peter had an authority that could never be corrected or challenged because we know that happened too.

But it does mean that just as God the Father revealed him the true identity of his son Jesus so he entrusted to Peter a key role in his church.

That's promise number one. Promise number two is about the church. Verse 18 I tell you you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

The gates of Hades the gates of hell it's better in the gates of death the powers of death. So this remarkable promise is that Jesus here is promising that he personally will establish and build the community of his followers.

[25 : 34] And he will do that in such a way that not even death will be able to afford it. It may well be that two thousand years of church history and gospel advance slightly obscures to us the magnitude of what Jesus is saying here.

The statement as he said it. Remember that when Jesus was speaking he had a band of followers who were not only limited in number but certainly in ability.

and in fact Peter's confession is quite shocking in Matthew's gospel because it's the first thing that the disciples have got right. they've been great to kill things wrong.

And you can add into that that Jesus knew that soon he himself would be killed as we'll see next week. And that is the context. And if you are a betting person you would not put a lot of money on the success of Jesus' enterprise at this moment in history.

And yet he's making a promise that despite his imminent death that despite the incompetence of his followers he personally will work in sovereign power and he will turn this bunch of half-baked disciples into a movement that will be more powerful than death.

[26 : 51] And it makes that a truly staggering promise. And once again history proves it true. Where are we now? We're just under 2,000 years on from that.

We're over 3,000 miles away from it and yet when Jesus said these words here we are today. What are we about 140 or so this morning?

Gathered together to listen to his words. And no one has made us come. We're here freely.

And there's groups like this meeting all over the world. Some of them won't be as big as us but many of them lots of them will be much bigger and there will be hundreds and hundreds of millions of people in church today worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ as the son of the living God.

And the world has changed beyond recognition in 2,000 years. You think about transformation even brought about by the advent of the printing press. You think of the advances in modern medicine, modern transportation.

[28 : 05] You think of the empires that have come and have gone but the church of the Lord Jesus Christ has stood firm. I've told you the illustration of mine so many times you're bored of hearing it but let me tell you again about Lord Reith, the first general director of the BBC and he goes into the director's meeting and they're talking about it.

Lord Reith was a professor and Christian and they're gathered around the table and they be quiet. He says, what are you talking about? They wouldn't tell him. What are you talking about?

They wouldn't tell him. And then somebody says, we were planning a BBC programme on the funeral of the church and Lord Reith fangs his hand on the table and says the church of Jesus Christ will stand at the graveside of the BBC.

And it will. And you can think of the future can't you? And there's so many that want to write the obituary of the church and there are certain grave threats to it today.

Chief among them are heresy from within and opposition from without. And new threats emerge all the time but for as long as Jesus delays, his church will stand.

[29 : 15] The final promise very briefly is about the power of the Christian message. Look at verse 19. The power given to the church. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth shall be found in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

And then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. The last bit is because they haven't really fully understood who Jesus is yet. The idea is much the same as chapter 10.

He says to them whoever receives you receives me and what he means is as the church proclaims the gospel message that you proclaim the apostolic gospel and as people receive that message from you, they are receiving Jesus Christ.

And so he's building on that idea, this gospel I am now appointing you to proclaim is very, very powerful. And if someone were to accept it, God as it were will unlock the gates of heaven and allow them to enter in.

But if they reject the message you proclaim then God will bar the doors and lock the gates and ensure that you never gain entry.

[30 : 32] it's a promise that is made in the first place to Peter and then the apostles but it holds to the preaching of the gospel today. And so realise afresh what we do here Sunday morning and Sunday evening, Sunday by Sunday is significant.

What do you do as God gives you the opportunity to speak with your friends about Jesus? And it's very easy isn't it to think about the biggest decisions in life. What are they? What are they going to be about? What would be the big decision?

What job do you do? Who you marry? The house that you buy? Though by far and away the most significant will be how you respond to the question of who Jesus is.

And that means that as we talk to people about the Christ, the son of the living God, it's our privilege isn't it to be involved with them at the most significant point of their whole eternity.

Because as we proclaim the gospel found in the Bible, written by the apostles, inspired by Jesus, so we hold before our friends the gates of heaven and hell.

[31 : 45] And the way that they respond to that message, not in one conversation but in life, will determine whether they walk through and some will be set free, some will be loosed from their sins and others will be bound in their sins forever to the judgment of God.

Christ, but it will turn on what they make of Christ. I think we do need to apply this more corporately because it's spoken to the church through Peter.

It makes what we do Sunday by Sunday more significant. what we do Sunday by Sunday is more significant than any golf tournament or any football game or any social engagement.

But what happens Sunday by Sunday, you see the keys of the kingdom are used to unlock the door of heaven to speak the message.

church or you reject the message of the gospel which you've heard this morning and you've sung this morning and you've confessed this morning, you reject that and the door is locked. The confession says the keys of the kingdom are given to the offices of the church.

[33 : 00] That's what we're doing Sunday by Sunday. We're opening up and closing. It demonstrates to you how important Jesus is. For hundreds of years, God has been promising the arrival of the one who will reign over the whole world forever, who would destroy evil, who would establish God's new heaven and new earth, a place without pain or suffering or tears or death, and the faithful people of Israel had longed for his coming.

They'd longed for the Son who would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlast, and Father, Prince of Peace. And now Peter realised he was here. You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

But now this morning the spotlight turns away from Peter. And on to us. And it's a very, very personal question isn't it?

And it's the most important question that you will ever answer. What about you? Who do you say that Jesus is? Let me do some prayer.

Let's pray. Let's pray.