

Matthew 16:13-20

Confessing Christ

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We live in a world where people have lots of different ideas about God and religion and what it means to be a Christian. Even if someone says they believe in Jesus, do they actually mean the same thing we do? This need for clarity has meant that the history of the church has always included confessions of truth, and rejection of errors. And Jesus demonstrated a version of that in our gospel reading today. His ministry had impacted a sizeable number of people. He had delivered some challenging teaching and performed quite a number of miracles. And before he sets out on the path to Calvary, to dying on the cross for the sins of the world, he quizzes his disciples. "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

In Matthew's gospel account, this question of Jesus' identity drives much of the story. This is why Matthew starts with a genealogy, establishing the basis for the rest of the story. And genealogies aren't just simple accounts of past ancestors. They are ways that we construct identity, ways in which we relate to our past. In Matthew, Jesus is inextricably linked to Abraham, to King David, to unique and extraordinarily faithful women such as Ruth, and to events like exile and deliverance.

Even the way Matthew tells the nativity story places Jesus in some very special company. The threats over his young life, the holy family's exile into Egypt, and their eventual return resonates greatly with the story of Moses. Some of Jesus' miracles were similar to those performed by the prophet Elijah. The way Jesus warned of coming judgment was very reminiscent of Jerimiah, and so was the rejection by some who did not like such a message.

Understanding this strong link in the narrative means that it's not at all surprising that some would think Jesus was a resurrected John the Baptist, or the fulfilment of the promised return of Elijah, or possibly Jerimiah or one of the other prophets. And the crowds have gotten an important part of Jesus' identity exactly right. His ministry is not something new and different in the journey of God and his people. He sits in this long line of faithful servants of God, prophets willing to stake their lives for the sake of God's people. Jesus is not a detour in God's plans, but the fulfilment of them.

So, the people are seeing some of the picture, but it's not quite all there. But then Jesus also asks a much more pointed question of the disciples. "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" This is not just a passing question, "What do you think?" "Who do you say I am?" is a matter of confession. When people ask about this Rabbi that you follow, what do you confess about him? When people see that your life is dedicated to this teacher, what reason do you give? Jesus gives the disciples a chance to confess the truth. And Peter gets it right, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

This is the first time in Matthew's gospel account that anyone in Jesus' audiences has unambiguously acknowledged him as the 'Christ', the 'Messiah'. Peter also declares him to be the Son of God, as all the disciples did after the incident on Lake Galilee where Jesus and then Peter walked on the water. But here Peter also adds the adjective 'living'. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

This is a characteristically Jewish way of referring to God to distinguish him from the lifeless idols of the gentiles. And it's also a reminder that only the God of Israel has life in himself which he can impart to others. So, Peter is confessing that Jesus is not just any divine man, but one who comes from the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Just like the crowds, Peter is confessing a connection back to the old covenant, but unlike the crowds, he believes Jesus is so much more than just another prophet sent by God. He is the Messiah, the anointed one promised long ago. He is the Son of God, meaning he is also divine, not just another fallible human on a God-given mission.

Peter's clear and true confession of faith should come as no surprise. He is disciple number one among the twelve. As the first one called to follow Jesus, Peter has been there for every lesson about the kingdom of heaven. And his confession suggests that he has been paying attention. Peter would have observed the healings of mercy, heard the sermons on justice, and eaten some of the small amount of bread that was multiplied and shared with thousands. He was saved by the grasp of the Lord's own hand when stormy waters threatened to sink him. He has seen and heard and tasted and touched.

Through the flesh and blood of his own experience Peter has learnt much about Jesus. He appears to be an excellent student, although he certainly also has his moments of failure. But the most important part of this little interaction of Jesus and the disciples is not Peter's capacity as a good student. The most important thing is the truth that gets confessed.

Peter and his fellow disciples are in the presence of the one who is anointed by, and Son of, the living God. Jesus is not just one prophet among a long line of prophets, as the people suggest by their multiple-choice answers. Peter's answer points in the direction of a greater truth: as Son of the living God, this Messiah is also the one who is 'God with us'. That truth is significant because it means, among other things, that everything the disciples have experienced with Jesus, everything they have learned from this Messiah through their limited human senses of sight, sound, taste, and touch, is not mere knowledge or experience revealed through 'flesh and blood.' It is, in fact, a revelation from God. Jesus, who is God, has revealed to them the truth, and they cannot help but confess this truth.

You too must face this question from Jesus, "Who do you say that I am?" As baptised children of God, do you join the church throughout the ages in confessing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God? Do you confess that in him alone is salvation and life eternal? Our confused world certainly needs such clear confessions of faith and truth, and I pray that the Holy Spirit would enable all of you to boldly do so. As we hear and read the Word, the Spirit is at work revealing the truth to us. This is not the work of our own flesh and blood, but the work of our Heavenly Father.

We thank God that he does this. That he gives us the truth of who Jesus is, that he reveals to us the good news of the kingdom of heaven. May we be eager to learn more of this truth, eager to experience more of Jesus, who is Immanuel, God with us. May we have such clarity of faith that we can be confident in confessing truth and rejecting error. And may we always know that Christ is our true and only hope, our source of life and salvation, and the ultimate fulfilment of every promise of God. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.