

18.06.24 Matthew 16:13-20 Peter's Confession

Introduction

You may remember from last week, that this month 140 years ago the Foundation Stone was laid for the first building on this site. The rock on which the church was built was driven into the earth. The church building and those who gathered here were named after Peter, the Apostle of Christ. The one to whom Jesus said, 'on this rock I will build my church.'

140 years have passed since this city corner was set apart for the service and worship of God, and set among a diverse and developing community. To mark this occasion, we are dedicating 40 days to prayer and fasting as we too are set apart to listen and respond to God's call and leading for us as a people of faith, and as we too are set among a diverse and developing community who need to know of God's love and mercy.

During these 40 days we will be looking at 4 stories about the life of Simon Peter – our namesake. These stories are set for us in four stained glass windows.

Last week we looked at Simon Peter's Call to Discipleship, to follow the way of Jesus. This week we will look at Simon Peter's Confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. In subsequent weeks we will look at two further stories.

The stories of Peter and his journey with Jesus are foundational stories for us. In the life and ministry of Peter we see something of our own call, our own confession, our own awe and wonder at God's miraculous power, and our own encounter with the Holy Spirit.

Poetry and Plumbing

As you may know, I am more of a poet than a plumber. If there were a burst pipe gushing water everywhere, I am more likely to say, 'what a disasterous yet marvellous situation we are in! Listen to the sound the water makes, look at the way it changes what it touches, feel it's coolness as it splashes you in the face. I don't know how to fix it, but maybe we should find someone who does.'

What is more useful in a burst water pipe situation is for a plumber to say, 'I know what we should do. Let's find the cause and figure out a solution. Look, this connects here, by this mechanism, and voila, the water travels as it should. We're it a bit of a mess but it'll be right in a jiffy.'

Today as I deliver this message, I am both a poet and a **plumber**. I have made a simple chart, a mechanism to help us see how the different elements of this story connect and fit together.

Audience

In this one passage there are at least three audiences, three different groups of people who encounter Jesus in a real and transformative way.

1. The first audience is Peter and the other disciples. They are Jewish men living in Israel in 30-something AD. Jesus' first disciples.
2. The second audience are those men, woman and children who are a part of the community that Matthew is writing to and for. These people are likely to be Greek speaking Jewish Christians, probably living in Syria sometime between 70-110 AD. These are second generation Christians with a Jewish heritage who are becoming increasingly Gentile in membership and outlook.
3. The third audience is us. A group of people from various backgrounds and ethnicities living in Tauranga Moana, New Zealand in 2018. We are second millennium Christians carrying a wealth of theological reflection and church tradition.

Context

These three audiences are each in a different context when they hear and respond to Jesus' question, 'who do you say that I am?'

1. Peter and the other disciples have journeyed with Jesus a good while now. They have seen him teach with authority and heal with power. Jesus has calmed storms and called out demons and given the Pharisees a run for their money. He has prepared and sent out his disciples to speak to and to serve their kinfolk with the good news that the Kingdom of Heaven is near. Jesus has fed more than 5000 people on next to nothing, and walked on water because he wanted to get to the other side.

All of these things have happened when Jesus and his disciples stop at Caesarea Philippi and Jesus says, 'who do others say that I am? Who do you say that I am?'

The fact that this happens at Caesarea Philippi is significant. This part of the country is at the northern border of Israel. It is the place where Enoch of the Old Testament received a revelation, it is a shrine dedicated to the Greek god Pan, and it is a Hellenistic city dedicated to Caesar Augustus which was rebuilt by Philip, the son of Herod the Great.

One commentator says, 'Ironically, despite its Greco-Roman culture and its location at the extreme edge of Israelite territory, it is here that the disciples finally and definitively recognise Jesus.'

Here, in this seemingly un-sacred place, the followers of Jesus recognise and name God's presence.

2. Matthew's readers, on the other hand, are in quite a different context. They are not in Caesarea Philippi; they may not even be in Israel. In their recent history there has been a failed revolt against Rome and a war between the Jews and the Romans. During this time the Temple in Jerusalem was ransacked and destroyed. A strong symbol of identity for the Jewish people was demolished.

It is to this dispersed and diverse group of people that Matthew writes, reminding them of Jesus' words and actions in the face of oppression and opposition. A generation later, Jesus asks his followers, 'who do you say that I am?'

3. For us, our context is Tauranga Moana, a peaceful harbour, a safe anchorage at the ends of the earth. We may physically be far from war, but the worries of our world are in our living rooms on our television screens and tablets every day. We live post-Christendom. Something our society caught on to long ago, but which the church is reluctant to release. We live in the aftermath of a global financial crisis and in the face of an ecological one. All around us there are changing worldviews, competing ideologies, and crazy fast advances in technology.

In this time of uncertainty and change, when we take a deep and calming breath and look back over two millennia we agree with writer of Ecclesiastes when he said, 'there is nothing new under the sun.'

Here, in our place and time we too are challenged by Jesus' words, 'who do you say that I am?'

Question

Each of these audiences, in their different contexts are asked the same question, 'who do you say that I am?'

Confession

Each responds with, 'You are the Christ. The Son of the Living God.'

1. Peter and the other disciples.

In the First Century, the term 'Messiah' or 'Christ' in the Greek, was understood in a variety of ways. Messiah, meaning, the Anointed One, had been used to describe many-a charismatic leader.

An expectation developed that the Messiah, the Christ, would be a revolutionary, a political leader, a military power who would frustrate the attempts of the enemy and bring change by force.

This may have been what Andrew had in mind when he introduced his brother, Simon Peter, to Jesus when Jesus was first gathering his entourage. You may remember from last week that according to the gospel of John, it is Andrew who first encounters Jesus before Simon Peter. Andrew searches his brother out and says, 'we have found the Messiah.' Andrew had first been a disciple of John the Baptist and he could have had any number of interpretations about how the Messiah, the Christ, would act on Israel's behalf.

When Simon Peter, as a spokesperson for the disciples, says to Jesus, 'You are the Christ' he adds, 'the Son of the Living God' to specify Jesus' high status as an Anointed One.

Simon Peters confession shows that he and the others identify that Jesus has qualities in common with past prophets; Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist. Messianic figures, people who were sent by God to challenge authority, perform miraculous deeds and stir up change.

Simon Peter's confession also demonstrates a growing understanding of Jesus' identity. Jesus' actions are in line with what God has been doing throughout history, yet, there is something more to Jesus. Not only is he anointed by God, he is the Son of God.

Simon Peter is right. And this time, Jesus doesn't say, 'O you of little faith.' Instead Jesus says, 'Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in Heaven.' Jesus commends Simon Peter, and this is the place where Jesus gives him a new name – a significant act.

Thus far, throughout Matthew, Simon is referred to as Simon Peter for the benefit of the readers. It is here for the first time that Jesus calls him Peter. I will come back to this because there is an important word play.

Peter and the others, they get it. And yet, they are still figuring it out. Remember, this is pre crucifixion, pre resurrection, pre Pentecost.

You may wonder why, at the end of this passage Jesus warns his disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Christ. It is because at the time, this confession, this claim, was prone to misinterpretation.

Throughout the remainder of the gospel narrative, and indeed the Early Church and the New Testament at large, we see the followers of Jesus figuring out what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah, the Christ. Over time the implications of their confession are revealed and unpacked.

2. Matthew's Readers

We see this in Matthew's readers, in this growing gathering of the Early Church. Like Peter and the others, this audience also confesses that Jesus is the Christ. Part of the conflict that we see in their context comes as a result of their confession that it is not Caesar who is Lord, but Jesus who is Lord.

As Jewish Christians, their confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, brings persecution and oppression, both from their Jewish roots and from Roman rule.

Like Peter and the disciples, Matthew's readers get it, Jesus is the Christ, who suffered and died and rose from the dead and sent his Spirit as a helper and guide. And yet, they are still figuring it out.

What does it mean for them as followers of this kind of Messiah, the kind who experiences suffering and endures persecution and establishes justice and freedom for all?

3. Us

Two millennia later we continue to confess that Jesus is the Christ, and we keep figuring out what that means. Like Peter and the others, like Matthew and his readers, we identify that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, and the meaning of that confession, the implication of Jesus' messianic activity in being revealed, played out, unpacked, in our midst.

Foundation

Do you remember how I said that there was a clever word play that we'd come back to? Well, this is it.

Following Simon Peter's confession Jesus blesses him and gives him a new name: Peter, saying, 'You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.' 'You are Peter and on this petra I will build my church.'

Here, Peter is a masculine name and petra is a feminine noun meaning rock. The noun, petra, the rock, does not refer to Peter, the man. It is not Peter on which Christ will build his church. Rather, it is upon the confession that Peter has uttered which will become a firm foundation for the gathering of Jesus' followers.

The confession is the rock on which the church is established and sustained. This confession that Jesus is the Christ is the foundation for that first generation of believers and for the countless generations to come, including our own.

Action

Our confession forms a foundation which leads to action. What does the messianic activity of Jesus look like in our context? Where do we see the power of God at work in our midst in both spectacular and subtle ways? In what ways is Jesus inviting us to join him in building this church of his?

Perhaps in thoughtful gestures, in supportive words, in the calling out injustice, in a home cooked meal, in a day of work, in a life of faithful service.

I have seen this kind of thing in action, in the lives of many-a dedicated follower of Jesus.

Today I want to make mention of Danny and Lily Besoro. Danny and Lily are missionaries in the Philippines who we as a church support with prayer, financial resources, and practical service. Danny and Lily are missionaries in their own country, blessing and serving the Mangyan tribes, those who have been physically and socially pushed to the edges of their society, away from the coast and into the mountains.

Danny and Lily were also members of St Peters when they lived here in Tauranga for a time. In their lives we can see the power of God at work in both spectacular and subtle ways. They can tell stories of dramatic, God-driven events that caused them to end up in strange places like Smokey Mountain in Manilla, or even Tauranga, a tiny city at the bottom of the earth, or back to the Philippines, to Calapan when all their children were grown, to establish a dormitory for other people's children to be nurtured and educated and cared for.

Danny and Lily can also tell stories of simplicity. Of patiently waiting on God for typhoons to pass over, for provisions to be delivered, for healing to come, slowly and surely.

A few years back Danny suffered a stroke which effected his mobility and speech, but not his heart to love and serve. Lily, while caring for her husband, continued to care for her new children, the Mangyan students.

In the lives of Danny and Lily we are inspired to consider ways in which we too are being invited to join Jesus in the building of his church here and now. Our contribution is both spectacular and subtle: thoughtful gestures, supportive words, calling out injustices, home cooked meals, days of work, lives of faithful service.

Who do we say that you are? You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. On this rock you build your church.