

## WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

Sermon prepared by The Rev. Dr. Ralph W. Bayfield, August 23, 2020  
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Today we are in the middle of the two weeks of our nation's process to nominate the two candidates who will be running to be elected the President and Vice-President of our country. It is up to us to learn who these people are and to elect the best people to lead our country.

Today's Gospel is a story about who Jesus is. The reading takes place on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea in the city named for the man who was in the comparable position of the "President" of the Roman Empire, the Caesar. The city's name is Caesarea Philippi. The Gospel of Matthew records the pivotal event when Peter proclaims that Jesus is indeed the Messiah.<sup>1</sup> All four Gospels record this event where Jesus is identified as the Messiah.<sup>2</sup>

Matthew's version of Peter's confession of Jesus as "*the Messiah, the Son of the living God,*" is distinctive with its focus on the preeminence of Peter's response.<sup>3</sup> In the opening verse of the passage Jesus asks the disciples, "*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*"<sup>4</sup> Their response includes John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets. The disciples' response is all over the map! Jesus continues to press the issue by asking, "*But who do you say that I am?*"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*The Holy Bible, NRSV* : Matthew 16:13-20; Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN page 18

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*: Mark 8:27-33; pages 43-44 ; Luke 9:18-22; page 69; John 6:66-69; page 99

<sup>3</sup> Franck, Paula editor *Scripture; Synthesis Year A, Proper 16*: PNSMI Publishing Co., Boyds, MD, August 27, 2017 page 1

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* Matthew 16:13

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* Matthew 16:15

At this point, Peter steps forward and declares that Jesus is “*the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*” This is the first time that one of the disciples has used the title *Messiah* for Jesus, although the distinction has been referred to before in Matthew’s Gospel.<sup>6</sup> In comparison to the other Gospel accounts, only Matthew adds the phrase “*Son of the living God.*” This phrase places the role of the Messiah within the reign of God and separates it from any nationalistic or militaristic connotations that were popular among the secular viewpoints of what the Messiah should be.

Jesus answer to Peter is: “*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.*”<sup>7</sup> Matthew’s version is unique as it makes a connection between Peter’s confession and the Church. Jesus pronounces a blessing on Peter since his awareness of Jesus Messiahship could only have come from God the Father and not from any human being- i.e, “*flesh and blood-* source. Peter never could have figured this out by himself. Peter is the only disciple to receive a specific blessing from Jesus.

The prominence of Peter is further verified as Jesus goes on to say that “*you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.*”<sup>8</sup> Although Jesus has already given to Simon the name of *Peter*, there is a play on words here that is possible in the Aramaic language as well as the Greek. The Aramaic name “*Petros*” is similar to the Greek word “*petra*”, which means boulder or rock. The name may indicate the foundation on which

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* Matthew 1:1, 16-18; 11:2

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* Matthew 16:17-19

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* Matthew 16:18

the Church edifice can be built,\* or it may refer to the character of Peter himself.

Following the example of Jesus, the leadership of Peter is based on the ministry of service and not domination. It will be the way of the Cross,<sup>9</sup> suffering, and not personal glory. The strengths and weaknesses of Peter reflect those of ordinary believers who strive, yet often fail to be loyal followers of Jesus. We all fall short of the glory of God.

Here and in Matthew chapter 18:15, 17, and 21 are the only places in which the Greek word “*ekklesia*” or church appears in the Gospels. This was no doubt the way Matthew distinguished the community that Jesus brings into being from the Jewish synagogue. We have to remember that the disciples and Jesus were all Jews! This community of faith is so grounded in Christ and his teachings that even “the powers of death” will not prevail against it.”<sup>10</sup> “Powers of death” is a correct paraphrase for the Greek word “*Hades*,” which stands for the Hebrew “*Sheol*,” or place of the dead. The phrase “*gates of Sheol*,” is found in the prophet Isaiah.<sup>11</sup>

When I was young, we used the old King James Version of the Bible and the phrase was “*the gates of hell*.” In those days if you went to church you were going to heaven, but if you did not go to church you were going to hell! Hell was also the common word used when you were mad at someone! I heard the words, “Go to hell!” and “drop dead,” but I never heard the phrase telling somebody to “go to the place of the dead!”

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* Matthew 16:21-16

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* Matthew 16:18, \*Making a slight case for building Churches out of stone, not brick.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Isaiah 38:10 *The Interpreter's Bible, Volume 7:* Abingon Press, New York, Nashville, 1951; Johnson, Sherman and Buttrick, George ; *Matthew 16:19 page 452*

Jesus, in conferring His personal authority on Peter, assures him and the Church that death's power will not prevail. The power of Christ has no equal, and Christ's work on earth will triumph. The Church exists to bear witness to Jesus as the *Messiah* and to spread the Kingdom of Christ's reign throughout the world.

Peter and the Church as a whole are given a further charge. Jesus says, "*I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.*"<sup>12</sup> As the holder of the keys, Peter's testimony opens the realm of heaven to believers, in contrast to the scribes and Pharisees who lock people out.<sup>13</sup>

"To *bind*" and to "*loose*" can be understood in light of a Jewish synagogue custom in which cases were judged through "*loosing*" or "*binding*" someone to a vow by their word. In the rabbis' use of this term, to bind was to declare something obligatory; whereas to loose one from it was to leave it to the individual's judgment.

In Matthew<sup>14</sup> this power is given to the community. The point here is that an earthly authority is established to edify the fellowship with God's guidance. Our Gospel passage ends with Jesus sternly directing the disciples "not to tell anyone that He was the Messiah."<sup>15</sup> The disciples must learn what the Messiahship of Jesus is before they can tell anybody else about it. Moreover, because of the ongoing conflict with religious and

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<sup>12</sup> *opp.cit.* Matthew 16:19: cf. Matthew 18:18 and Isaiah 22:22

<sup>13</sup> cf. Matthew 23:13

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* Matthew 18:18

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* Matthew 16:20

political leaders, openly proclaiming Jesus as Messiah would be dangerous.<sup>16</sup>

Thomas a' Kempis, the great Dutch theologian who lived from 1379 to 1471, whose work *The Imitation of Christ*, that is considered next to the Bible as the, most influential work in Christian literature<sup>17</sup> has some thoughts that are worthy of reflection and meditation for us.

Thomas writes:

“There will always be many who love Christ’s heavenly kingdom, but few who will bear his cross. Jesus has many who desire consolation, but few who care for adversity. He finds many to share his table, but few who will join him in fasting. Many are eager to be happy with him; few wish to suffer anything for him.

Many will follow him as far as the breaking of the bread, but few will remain to drink from his passion. Many are awed by his miracles, few accept the shame of his cross. Many love Christ as long as they encounter no hardship; many praise and bless him as long as they receive some comfort from him. But if Jesus hides himself and leaves them for a while, they either start complaining or become dejected. Those, on the contrary, who love him for his own sake and not for any comfort of their own, praise him both in trial and anguish of heart as well as in the bliss of consolation. Even if Jesus should never comfort them, they would continue to praise and thank him. What power there is in a pure love for Jesus- love that is free from all self-interest and self-love!”

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<sup>16</sup> opp.cit. Franck, Paula: Synthesis Yr. A; Proper 16, Scripture, August 27, 2017 page 1

<sup>17</sup> Thomas a' Kempis: *Britannica Encyclopedia Inc., Volume 11; 15th Edition; Chicago, 1987, page 713*

Let us reflect on the words of Thomas a' Kempis.<sup>18</sup>

How do we react to our Gospel lesson of Peter's confession that Jesus is "*The Messiah, the Son of the living God;*" and Jesus response that Simon is Peter, the "rock" who receives the charge to build the Church, with its responsibilities of binding and loosing, and receiving the keys to the Kingdom of heaven?

I recall Dr. A.T. Mollegen, "Molly," as he was known at the Virginia Theological Seminary, when teaching about the Gospels said, "Peter is everyone. Peter is every man and woman alive." Then he said, "You are Peter," and I say to you this morning, "You are Peter." Peter became a leader. Rosalynn Carter, a former first lady, once said, "A leader takes people where they want to go. A great leader takes people where they don't necessarily want to go, but ought to be."<sup>19</sup>

This morning, let us ask ourselves who do we say Jesus, the Son of Man is? And where ought we to be? Where should our forthcoming candidates for President and Vice President of the United States lead us? Let us pray that we may be faithful as we answer our Lord Jesus Christ.

*Amen.*

**PROPER 16** Let us pray:

Grant, O merciful God, that your Church, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all peoples, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. *Amen.*

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<sup>18</sup>Thomas a' Kempis, quoted in Synthesis, Year A; Proper 16 Tradition, page 2

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Synthesis, Year A; Proper 16 Postscript; Rosalynn Carter, page 4

## PRAYER FOR WHO HAVE ENTERED LARGER LIFE

Dear Lord, your Son Jesus who is the way, the life and the truth, did pass through death to enter your attractive realm of larger life: Bless Bill, Peggy and all who have died and come to you in your heavenly Kingdom. May they have joy with you and all who have moved on before us. Comfort those who mourn. Lift us up to see that where they have new larger life, we too shall one day also ascend; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

## *FOR THOSE SUFFERING FROM THE CORONOVIRUS*

O God of heavenly powers, by the might of your Son's command, all sickness and infirmity that He met was driven away. May your healing mercies be with all those suffering from the Coronovirus now enveloping the people of your world. Comfort and relieve the suffering that weakness and sickness may be banished, strength restored, good health returned and a cure come to your children and servants. Inspire the scientists to find a vaccination that will destroy this evil virus and end its reign. Bless people striving to end this sickness, all those working in the government, the medical and the emergency fields; keep them safe and protect them. Be with all who work in hospitals those comforting the sick, We thank you for your many blessings and mercy through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

## FOR THE ELECTION

Almighty God, to whom we must account for all our powers and privileges: Guide the people of the United States of America in the election of the President and Vice-President, the Senate, the House of Representatives and all officials to be elected; that by faithful administration and wise laws, the rights of all may be protected and our nation be enabled to fulfill your purposes, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

## THE PEACE

The Peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be amongst you and remain with you always. *Amen*