

**“FOLLOWING THE KING – 47”**

***Matthew 16:13-20***

Matthew’s story of Jesus now reaches a pivotal point. In every sense, everything Matthew has written so far has been leading up to this point, a crucial episode that is included in all three synoptic gospels. This is the moment that Matthew’s first readers would have been waiting for – the revelation of who Jesus actually is. And every part of Matthew’s well-crafted account is crucial here. The details which he includes are all pertinent to the point he is making, to the person he is describing.

It takes place in Caesarea Philippi, a city built by Herod the Great’s son Philip and named in honour of Caesar (and, of course, Philip). Herod himself had also built a city called Caesarea, on the coast. It’s some way north of Galilee, at the foot of the majestic Mount Hermon. Originally, it was a site sacred to the Syrians and a centre for the worship of Ba’al, the pagan god so often mentioned in the Old Testament. When the Greeks overran the region, the city was named Paneas and a grotto in the city was dedicated by the Greeks to the worship of the nature god, Pan. (He’s the one Ratty and Mole encounter in *The Wind In the Willows*.) It’s also reckoned to be the source of the River Jordan, so has all kinds of national and religious significance for the Jewish people. And, when Philip rebuilt the city, a huge temple of white marble was built and dedicated to the worship of Caesar. This was a city with all kinds of religious connections and the crossroads of at least four powerful religions over the centuries – all of which still had some adherents in the city. It is at this place that Jesus stands, surrounded by the symbols and heritage of Jewish and pagan beliefs and asks, “*Who do people say the Son of Man is?*”.

Using the phrase “*the son of man*” was sometimes just a circumlocution for talking about oneself – “this little fellow” is how we might say it today. But it was also a phrase rich in meaning for the Jewish people, for whom the Son of Man was a figure used by their own Hebrew prophets to look forward to the servant of God. But the disciples respond with a variety of answers, which they had no doubt picked up from conversations amongst those who had been to see and hear Jesus as he made his way around Galilee and this area to the north. Basically, although they identify him with different specific figures, everyone seems to think he is a prophet. He’s a good man, possibly inspired by God.

That’s very much as many people would respond today. And certainly the followers of other religions – most notably Islam – would have Jesus down as a prophet. For many people around the world today, Jesus has a special status. He is revered, although not worshipped, as someone who spoke wisely and was in some way connected to God. And many non-religious people also have Jesus down as a good man, a powerful teacher, a person of great spirituality and so on. But most people go no further than that. He is not someone to be worshipped, certainly not divine. And although many would acknowledge him as a wise man and a good teacher, they don’t actually want to take much notice of what he says.

Jesus then puts the question directly to his disciples. They've been following him, watching him, listening to him, observing him for the best part of three years by now, so what's their opinion of him? We don't know if there was an awkward pause, finally broken by Peter, or whether Peter blurted out the answer so that he'd be the first to speak, but it's good old Peter who responds on their behalf. He sees Jesus as "*the Christ*", the Messiah. He acknowledges Jesus as the one they have been waiting for, the promised Kingly Messiah who has come to make the Kingdom of God a reality on earth. For Matthew's first readers, these Jewish believers, anxiously trying to work out if following Jesus is a betrayal of their faith, this would have been a point at which they could heave a huge sigh of relief. Matthew has already done all that he can by quoting from and alluding to their own Scriptures to demonstrate that Jesus is really the fulfilment of the promises of the Hebrew prophets and preachers, and now it's all made explicit. This is, indeed, the Messiah figure whose arrival was predicted in the poetry and the preaching and the prophecies of the Old Testament. It's OK to believe in him. In fact, it's pretty well obligatory to believe in him as the culmination of God's plan of renewal and restoration.

And Peter adds, "*the Son of the living God*". Now it's important that we don't assume that Peter is formulating some kind of Trinitarian theology here. That doesn't come along until much later. He is simply stating that Jesus is someone who has a very special relationship with God – indeed, a unique relationship with him. There are, again, pointers to this throughout the Old Testament, places where God addresses figures who are specially called and specially anointed to do his work. Often there are kingly overtones as well. Look, for example, at *Psalms* 2, often taken to be a messianic Psalm:

*I will proclaim the Lord's decree:  
He said to me, "You are my son;  
today I have become your father.  
Ask me,  
and I will make the nations your inheritance,  
the ends of the earth your possession.*

Or 2 *Samuel* 7:

*"When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son."*

Here's Peter, the man with a good Jewish heritage, expressing his belief that Jesus is certainly the one they have been expecting and the one who will make a difference to the world. In that simple sentence – "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*" – he sums up so much of what we believe about Jesus.

And Jesus clearly reckons Peter has got it right, because he blesses him. And what a blessing this is! Jesus says to start with that this is an inspired answer. Peter hasn't been told what to say or helped in his thinking by merely human considerations. He hasn't come to this conclusion because of forced signs –

such as the Pharisees and Sadducees were asking for in the passage we looked at last week. God has told him this. Peter himself has a special connection with God as he tried to make sense of Jesus and who he is. Peter's positive response is one which will have powerful implications for him – and for the Church – way on into the future.

Now, we Protestants don't find this bit very easy, do we? We don't like the idea that Peter is the foundation of the Church – that's the kind of thing Catholics believe. Except, of course, Catholic theology adds a bit to this and says that Peter **and his successors** are somehow the foundation of the Church, something that creates a direct line through every Pope down to the present incumbent. So we try to find ways round what Jesus says here very clearly – that Peter will be the foundation of his Church. And there isn't actually any way round that. With this pun on the word for "rock" (petra) and the name "Peter" (*Petros*) in Greek, Jesus says that Peter is the rock on which the Church is to be built. In Hebrew the word play is even more appropriate as the words for "rock" and "Peter" are actually identical (*cephas*).

It's Peter who will be the foundation of the Church – not his faith, nor his confession, but the man himself. Paul emphasises that in *Ephesians 2:20*: "*Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.*" The word for church here – *ekklesia* – is only used twice in the Gospels and both by Matthew. It's a word which means "*called out*" or "*drawn together*" and is used of all kinds of gatherings and assemblies in Greek, and it's the word used for the gathering together of God's people in the Greek translation of the Old Testament too. Peter is to be the starting point, the first member of this new community which will be the arena in which the Kingdom of God becomes apparent.

And this Church, this new community, will not be overcome by "*the gates of Hades*" – another odd phrase to our ears. "*The gates*" is clearly the way in and Hades is not another word for hell, as we often use it, but the place of the dead, something through which all pass. Jesus is saying that this new Church will never die. What we have here is a reference to an eternal institution. The Church of Jesus Christ, built on the foundation provided by Peter and the other apostles, will never be overcome, never become extinct. Anyone who has ever read any Church History will be able to see that, even through the darkest of times, even under the greatest of pressures, the Church has always survived, always been kept alive by the faithfulness of the saints and the power of the Holy Spirit.

What's more, Peter is to be given the keys to the Kingdom which is to be made evident in the life of the Church. He is to be given access to the Kingdom and will then be able to announce it to everyone. Peter

is the one who will make accessible the life of the Kingdom of God. And we see that as we read on through the New Testament, particularly in *Acts*. It is Peter who preaches that powerful sermon on the day of Pentecost, a sermon which draws over 3,000 Jewish people into the life of the Kingdom. It is Peter who is instrumental in the conversion of the Samaritans in *Acts 8*. It is Peter who proclaims the good news of the Kingdom to the first Gentiles when he preaches to the household of Cornelius in *Acts 10*. There's no getting away from the fact that it is indeed Peter who first seems to proclaim the accessibility of the Kingdom of God to all those at the heart of Jesus' commission to his followers – "*Jerusalem, Samaria and the ends of the earth*".

Along with the keys to the Kingdom, Peter is given by Jesus the power of binding and loosing. That strange expression is one which was very much part of the vocabulary of the Jewish Rabbis. To bind something was to forbid it. Rabbi Hillel was well known for his binding, his decrees that placed restrictions on behaviour and activity. To loose something was to permit it, to legislate that something was allowed. The famous Rabbi Shammai was best remembered for that amongst the Jews. So Jesus is telling Peter that as he teaches people he will have the task of telling them what is allowed and what is not allowed by God. The tenses here can be translated as "*will have been bound ... will have been loosed in heaven*". Again, we see that in the role Peter takes as a leader in the Church in *Acts*, influential at the Council of Jerusalem and obvious in his preaching and letters.

So Peter is to be a pivotal character in the life of this new community, the Church – the community through which the signs of God's Kingdom will become apparent. Of course, there will be ups and downs – glance down to v22 or think ahead to the scene in the High Priest's courtyard where Peter betrays Jesus – but in the end, Peter will be empowered and used by God in amazing ways. He has recognised and confessed that Jesus is the Kingly Messiah. It is a significant moment for Jesus, for the Church and for Peter himself. And Peter's response to Jesus' question has far-reaching implications for him and for many, many others.

And still that is the case. Our response to Jesus has highly significant implications. When Jesus says to us, as he does in so many ways, "*But what about you? Who do you say I am?*", then what we reply has ramifications that will last for eternity. You've all heard something about Jesus this morning and I suspect that it's not the first time for anyone here. You have heard about who he says he is. You have heard what others say about him. You have heard about what he does and the things he claims for himself as we have read from the Bible and as that has been expanded on in the sermon. You may have heard it in other ways – the lines of a song, the plot of a film, the conversations with a friend, the books you've read, the things you were taught at school. You've had an opportunity to find out a bit about Jesus. And there comes a point for everyone when we have to make up our minds about how we respond.

Of course, you may decide to put it off until you're standing in front of him when this life comes to an end – and then it's too late to change your mind. But if you are able to make the decision before that, then you've got time for it to have an impact on your life.

And it has to be a personal response. You can't just parrot back what other people might have said. You can't start it with "We ..", but with "I ...". "*But what about you? Who do you say I am?*" asks Jesus again this morning. And once you have acknowledged that he is, indeed, who he says he is – as millions of people have acknowledged over the centuries – then your life will never be the same again. Just like Peter, as you recognise Jesus as the Christ, the Kingly Messiah – as Lord and Saviour – then you will receive his blessing. You will be granted membership of this new community with its promise of resurrection life, with access to the Kingdom of God. There's a risk, of course. Life might get very dangerous, very hard. Those of you who were at the Churches Together meeting on Wednesday will have heard Jane Newsome, the chaplain at Swinfen Hall YOI, talking about a guy in there who has to face that risk daily. As a member of family of London gangsters who have huge influence and powerful networks outside and inside prisons, he was expected to continue the family business, as it were. But once he had acknowledged Jesus and decided to renounce his former way of life and told his family that he would never take part in their activities again, he can no longer even leave his cell without the protection of warders.

But that decision – for Peter, for that prisoner, for millions of people who have taken up with the Kingly Messiah – that decision has eternal significance. That significance starts to make itself apparent in this life as we join other not only in worship of the Kingly Messiah, but in witnessing to him and living for him day by day. You've made a decision, even if that decision is to sit on the fence. You have to live with the consequences of that each day. And you'll have to live with the consequences of that for eternity, wherever you spend it. "*What about you? Who do you say that I am?*"

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Jesus says that this is an inspired answer and that Peter will be the foundation of his Church. (There is a pun on the word for "rock" (petra) and the name "Peter" (*Petros*) in Greek.) It's Peter who will be the foundation of the Church – not his faith, nor his confession, but the man himself. (Paul emphasises that in *Ephesians 2:20*.) The word for church here – *ekklesia* – is only used twice in the Gospels and both by Matthew. It's a word which means "*called out*" or "*drawn together*" and is used of all kinds of gatherings and assemblies in Greek, and it's the word used for the gathering together of God's people in the Greek translation of the Old Testament too. Peter is to be the starting point, the first member of this new community which will be the arena in which the Kingdom of God becomes apparent.

And this Church, this new community, will not be overcome by "*the gates of Hades*" – it will never be overcome, never become extinct. What's more, Peter is to be given the keys to the Kingdom which is to be made evident in the life of the Church. He is to be given access to the Kingdom and will then be able to announce it to everyone. Peter is the one who will make accessible the life of the Kingdom of God. In *Acts* it is Peter who preaches first to the Jews (*Acts 2*), the Samaritans (*Acts 8*) and the Gentiles (*Acts 10*).

Peter is also given by Jesus the power of binding and loosing. As he teaches people he will have the task of telling them what is allowed and what is not allowed by God. So Peter is to be a pivotal character in the life of this new community, the Church – the community through which the signs of God's Kingdom will become apparent. He has recognised and confessed that Jesus is the Kingly Messiah. It is a significant moment for Jesus, for the Church and for Peter himself. And Peter's response to Jesus' question has far-reaching implications for him and for many, many others – as it does for us.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. Why do you think Jesus asks the disciples this question? Surely he knows the answer already?
2. What do you understand by Jesus' words to Peter, "*You are the rock on which I will build my church*" ?
3. What are "*the keys of the Kingdom*"?
4. Why do you think Jesus told the disciples not to tell anyone he was the Christ/Messiah?
5. When a friend or colleague asks you who you think Jesus is, how will you reply?