

**Date: August 23, 2020**

**Reading: Matthew 16:13 – 20**

**Theme: The unshakeable truth that supports us**



I grew up in a time when it was tradition to hand over a key at a 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Usually a symbolic key, a big cardboard one that everyone could sign. A key that symbolised giving that person the keys to life; the point where they could now make their own decisions about their life. Now it's more about handing over the keys to the car at an 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Either way, it's about recognising independence and the trust and hope that the person will make sound and proper decisions. For some of us parents, that point comes with great trepidation! Given all that we know about Peter the disciple, the impetuous nature, the stumbles and failures, are we really happy that he gets the keys to the church? But then, this passage starts with the question, "Who is Jesus?", not, "Who controls the church?"

In a time and culture when there were no family names, people were named as 'son of' or 'daughter of'. Here we have Simon, son of Jonah; one of only two times in scripture that we are told who Simon's father was. Then, in this confusion of names, we are told that Simon is also called Simon Peter and that Peter is actually the Greek word for rock, and it's a nickname. We aren't sure about the purpose of the nickname; Peter doesn't seem very firm or faithful. It's a nickname that Peter seems to have had some fun with if you read his epistle, where he talks of Jesus as the rock that was rejected, and that we should all consider ourselves living stones to be built into a spiritual house. In this story it seems that Jesus is calling him the rock upon which the church will be built. But then, this passage starts with the question, "Who is Jesus?", not, "Who is Peter?"

There is a lot of conversation about the word 'church' in this passage. What does it mean? There was no such thing as a church in Jesus time. There was no such thing as a church, in our understanding of the word, in Matthew's time. The Greek word 'ecclesia' simply means 'called out'. The word was used in normal civic life for meetings of summoned, elite people in Roman society. For Matthew's community it possibly meant the community who were 'called out' of the synagogue; a title of self-identification long before the emergence of what we might call 'the church'. But then, this passage starts with the question, "Who is Jesus?", not, "What is the church?"

This passage is about Jesus. Jesus is the one who asks the question, "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus is the one who gives Peter the nickname and the authority. Jesus is the one who calls and builds a community of called people. Jesus is the one who is present in the community as the leaders and the people determine what is binding in the teachings of scripture and what is not. Like all good children's addresses, when we ask what this passage is about, the answer is Jesus. Who is Jesus? And not 'who is Jesus to all the theologians and preachers and evangelists and scholars?' Who is Jesus to you?

A lot is made of this passage. It's one of the key passages for the doctrine of the Pope. On the other hand, it's one of the key passages for the doctrine of evangelical confession – that

Jesus is the Christ. However, we need to be careful to read Matthew as a complete work and not just pick out passages. Matthew wants us to read the story after this one before we make up our mind about who Jesus is. And the story after that, and the story after that. There's no mystery, or conspiratorial secret, that Jesus orders the disciples not to tell people that he was the Messiah. The cultural and religious expectations of that title were not Jesus expectations. We can applaud Peter for his confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God, but the story following this passage shows that he had a poor idea of what his words meant. His idea of Messiah left no room for the crucifixion! And his reaction to the Transfiguration – 'let us build three tents' – shows he had a limited grasp of the great mission that Jesus was on. The question, "Who do you say that I am", was clearly not seeking a definitive, for all time answer. More information, more experience and more revelation were required. Matthew is saying, 'read the whole story before you make up your mind.'

I have a favourite little theory about the Gospel of Mark. The enigmatic ending is not that the disciples don't find a resurrected Jesus, it's an instruction – go to Galilee - to read the book again and find Jesus yourself, with all the information. So, when you get to Mark's version of this story, and the question, "Who do you say that I am", you have a bigger picture to help you find your answer.

*Jesus said to them, "And who do you say that I am?" They replied, "You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being, the revealed ontological foundation of the context of our very selfhood." And Jesus said, "What?"*

Adding more information and experience doesn't mean creating a deeply theological dissertation, unless that's what you need to get your head around the whole Jesus story. It's enough to find your own words. Words that capture, for you, the way that Jesus has brought you into closer relationship with God. After all, that is the foundational reason for Jesus coming to the world; to reconcile people with God. Some of us find that reconciliation in Jesus teaching, some in the wonderful, violence conquering sacrifice on the cross, some in the very real, heartfelt sense that Jesus is alive, here and now, and some in the compassionate healing and welcome that Jesus expressed. Jesus tells the disciples not to tell people that he was the Messiah. Last week we explored the inner confusion we have between Jesus the Son of God and Jesus the son of Mary So, if words like Messiah and Son of God don't capture what you think of Jesus, then find others. Six years ago, preaching this same text, I put Peter's confession into more modern language:

*"You are the promised one, in unique and welcoming relationship with the present, engaging God"*

An attempt to capture the sense of Peter's words for those who have no idea what Messiah or Christ means, confusion or objection to the word Son, or limited understanding of what living might mean in relation to God. However, those words are still structured around titles and not experience. An alternative might be:

*"You are the compassionate, true person who openly welcomes us into relationship with a loving God."*

*"Highfield Road Uniting Church: Celebrating vibrant faith & gracious hospitality"*

Your experiences, your spiritual life, your understanding will lead you to find your words. Words that can answer the question, 'Who is Jesus?', for you. Maybe what Matthew was leading us to is the realisation that the question itself is the foundation of the church. Peter's words of confession bring life to some, but they don't convey the experiences and culture and the inner life for all of us. Another insight from this passage that is hidden by language is Jesus referring to the 'gates of Hades not prevailing'. This is not some veiled reference to evil and sin, but simply a statement that the calling and building of the community will not end with the death of that generation. There is a permanence to the community based on each generation addressing this question of 'Who is Jesus' and finding answers in their experience and language. Always recognising that scripture contains given stories that are to be respected for insights and learning. Our task is to reinterpret – binding and loosing – not reinvent.

“Who do you say that I am?” Rather than being given keys to the kingdom, this is the key question that confronts us as we try to live out our faith in this time and culture. Finding the words from all of our learning, our experiences and our community life that proclaim the faith, and then finding ways to make that confession to the world in words that carry our passion and our conviction. Words that are our answer and that may lead people to find their answer. The ongoing task of allowing Jesus to be the one who reconciles the world to God. Amen

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