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Who? (Matthew 16:13-20)

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Last Monday was our final session of 12 weeks of exploring “The Artist's Rule” by Christine Valters Paintner.

A group of around 29 people reflected on the contemplative and creative life, and as we practised and read and created and shared with each other, we grew in confidence and in community so that last week we each created our own rule of life, reflecting our answers to our own questions of, 'Who am I?' And 'Who am I called to be?'

In today's gospel, we hear a defining moment.

In Matthew's Gospel, unlike in Mark where it is the turning point of the whole story, here, the disciples have already previously identified Jesus as Messiah, so Peter's confession is not quite so dramatic. Instead, the turning point of this story is that Jesus would build his church on the cracked foundation of a flawed disciple. ... The story doesn't simply end triumphantly, however, but with a charge for the church, for us, to live according to this new way of being. The church is not to stand lauding it over others, but is given the power “to bind and loose,” unleashing the power of forgiveness and grace in the world and heralding the prophetic role of the church in fighting oppression.¹

Peter, representative of the church, finds out more of who he is, and he continues to learn, and to grow, both by being connecting with God and by making mistakes. He becomes a great human leader.

As they drew near to Caesarea Philippi Jesus said to them, "Who do you say that I am?" And he asked them again as they drew near to Canberra, Pretoria, London, and as they walked past the businesses, churches, and shops in every small town. "But who do you say that I am?" Jesus' question is that of extraordinary vulnerability.

It is no accident that the story begins at Caesarea Philippi because it is the seat of government; the Tetrarch Phillip named it after Caesar and himself. Jesus is laying down a challenge to the disciples, and to us. Are you on the side of the government and the powerful, or have you committed to me — to the Kingdom of Heaven, the way, to which I point?

We may get that Jesus is fierce for righteousness like John the Baptist. We may see he is a great prophet of God like Elijah. We can even understand he is a suffering prophet like Jeremiah, but that's not the point here. He is Messiah, Son of God, says Peter. This confession is not a credo, not what Peter says he believes, but praxis, how he, how I live.

¹ Drew Dyson, [Abingdon Preaching Annual 2020](#), p. 100-101

Let's explore this a bit more, Who is this Jesus? Who was he then? And who is he now? Why did he ask the question? And why does it matter?

Peter has been travelling with Jesus, watching, listening, seeing him heal and cast out Demons and tell stories. He believed that he was the anointed one, Messiah, the one to save Israel from its oppressors, the one who was life and health and wholeness.

But we are not back there over 2000 years ago. We are here, and know about Jesus in these stories in the Gospels, and through other people's stories and experiences and through our own wisdom. If I were to answer Jesus' question, I would say, perhaps:

Jesus, You are an important part of my life. You are part of the godhead, Holy Trinity, one God. I have relating to you differently at different times in my life. At one point in my early 30s I was in love with you, I think and afraid of physical encounter. In my imagination, I called Mary your mother to make sure I was safe..

I read your stories and your words and see your actions, especially in the time leading up to your death. I respect, your silence and your strength. I love the way you cared for your mother and your friend John. I love the way you want to serve God , you're ABBA your Father. I love the way you are real, "if I can get out of this, somehow, please make it happen" "why have you forsaken me?" you said.

And then those stories, after your death of meeting people, and not being quite understood on the road, sharing bread and wine, and, by the lake, sharing bread and fish, always wanting reconciliation and love.

To tell you the truth, these days, I don't seem to talk too much, it's more silence, wordlessness, intuition and feelings. And in my imagination, I think of God more broadly than you, God Creator, God Spirit, particularly when I'm asking for something that's on my heart, the world situation, environment and more specifically people close to home.

The Christ, Christos, Jesus, I certainly think you showed me a lot about God and God's inclusiveness, forgiveness and compassion; God's challenging those who think 'I've got it right', in particular those in power who think especially of themselves as religious.

(What more could I say to these people here in the hall and online right now? I could talk about Sophia in the Hebrew Scriptures, and how you are that Sophia, who was with the creator at the beginning, who delighted God and worked with God to create the fish of the Barrier Reef and the dinosaurs. I love these creation stories. You were there.)

Davis Lose says he would answer:

I think Jesus also came to show us what's possible. And so rather than give into the threat of disease, Jesus healed. Rather than surrender people to demons, Jesus showed compassion. Rather than let people starve because there's not enough to go around, Jesus fed people who were hungry. Jesus refused to be satisfied or limited by the status quo and invites us to do the same, because if Jesus' life and death show us how much God loves us, Jesus' resurrection shows us that that love is more powerful than hate and fear and even death. Jesus shows us, in short, that God's love wins.²

² <https://www.davidlose.net/2014/08/pentecost-11-a-who-do-you-say-i-am/>

So what do we do with this today? These old stories that go on telling, these relationships that go on being and evolving as relationships do with those who have lived before, our ancestors. Maybe I could say, you are, friend, lover, healer, wisdom, teacher, you are God?

Nikolai says in answer to Jesus' question, 'Who do you say I am?' - "in you, we live and move and have our being".

His answer is a deep theological answer "in you we live. You are the ground. You are the centre, you motivate my action, and I grow in my being with you."

This answer, articulates his life in Jesus, in the Christ, in God.

That is not an answer I will give to Jesus specifically, but to the whole of who God is: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Maker, Redeemer, and Spirit of Grace; Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver. And there is much thought about how I act in the world, because of my understanding of God, for example, how I respond to difficult people in difficult situations, how I live.

Jesus, You applauded Peter for his words, and then said, "Don't tell anyone". Why? Is it because they couldn't get it? That their idea of the Messiah was not true enough? Is it because they needed parables, they needed to see and hear, and know within themselves rather than being told? Is it because they were too close to the centre of Empire in that place?

"Don't tell anyone." This wouldn't necessarily be a great evangelism technique. Or would it? What if we followed the model of the gospel of Matthew, offering the signs of Jesus - the kindness, mercy, healing, forgiveness, abundance, justice, just come, approaching people with Jesus' way first, as I think we do at Benedictus. Rather than Jesus first, we build relationships, and go deeper, focussing on the questions and silence.³

Peter answers on behalf of the community in a way that satisfies Jesus in this moment, but in the next passage, he stuffs up. He doesn't want to own the suffering that is necessary. He is a wonderful flawed character in which the early church is built. I think perhaps the church is built on forgiveness and facing the darkness. It is definitely not about earthly power.

Jesus says to Peter, that you only get to know this answer from God through sensing and knowing. It's not something you can work out with your head, it's about immersing yourself, looking listening, touching, feeling. "God has revealed this to you and on you I will build my church" He says "whatever you bind will be bound, whatever you loose will be loosed". In the story, Jesus is saying to Peter the representative of the church that he has power to bind, and to release, authority or power that is being abused so often in the church, and that's why many people have chucked the church in, the institutional church, while many say, they are still spiritual, but not religious, not wedded to institution, but open to a reality beyond the dailyness, it is not the human being, Jesus, but something more that represents what he shows, what he teaches, how he relates to the divine with times of silence and times of action, meeting people where they are at.

It means that I try to live filled with and sharing God's love, aware of the brokenness of the world but even more aware of God's grace and the power of the resurrection. It means, I think, that I look at all of my life – my time, my relationships, my hopes, dreams, finances, and all the rest –

³ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper16a/#Matthew16:13-20>

through the lens of both the power and possibilities created by seeing God's heart laid bare in Jesus.⁴ says Lose.
But how would you answer?

⁴ <https://www.davidlose.net/2014/08/pentecost-11-a-who-do-you-say-i-am/>