

## Matthew 16: 13-20

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" <sup>14</sup> They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup> "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

<sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

<sup>17</sup> Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you that you are Peter,<sup>[a]</sup> and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades<sup>[b]</sup> will not overcome it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be<sup>[c]</sup> bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be<sup>[c]</sup> loosed in heaven." <sup>20</sup> Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

### Who am I? Who are you?

I've been watching DVDs of Yes Minister recently. In the episode, 'doing the honours', Bernard and Jim Hacker discuss various honours. "Of course in the service, CMG stands for Call Me God," says Bernard. "And KCMG for Kindly Call Me God."

"What does GCMG stand for?" asks Jim.

"God Calls me God".

In Matthew 16, Jesus and Peter come to the important reciprocal statements of who they really are. Who do they say I am? Who do you say I am? Let me tell you who you are!

So we begin with a question — who do the men say the son of man is? Is he asking if people understand the phrase 'son of man' from Daniel chapter 7? That this 'son of man' is the same as the Messiah? Or is Jesus asking Peter if the crowd have worked out who *he* is exactly? Peter understands the question that way — the crowd are confused. There are some who suppose that he is John the Baptist risen from the dead, others, again are confused and suppose he is Elijah, which is to say that they think he is the prophet who will come before the Messiah. Others are vaguer still: Jeremiah? One of the prophets?

'What about you?' asks Jesus. 'You are the messiah, the son of the Living God.' It is a definitive expression of faith. To use Bernard's terms, Peter concludes that he is Jesus Christ 'GCMG'.

But Peter and the disciples have recognised Jesus's identity before now: in Matthew 14:33, when Jesus had walked on the water, the disciples collectively said 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

What is different now? On that occasion they had seen him walk on the water. They were tired and shocked: this was a reaction. Now Peter responds on their behalf in the clear light of day. It is not speculation, it is not a moment of awe, but a clear-eyed statement. You are the Son of God. The evidence had grown, there was no debate. They know that Jesus is more even than a great prophet. He is the anointed one.

Jesus turns the attention to Peter making his nickname official. 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah... and I tell you you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.'

Actually, Peter is not the only rock. In Isaiah 51 Abraham is described as the rock from which those who pursue righteousness are cut. Psalm 18 says, 'The Lord is my rock'. And in Matthew 7, we are reminded that the wise man builds his house upon the rock — the rock being Jesus's words. Furthermore, it was well understood that the temple in Jerusalem was

built upon the rock: tradition had it that this was birthplace of creation, and the place where Abraham had so nearly sacrificed Isaac. The mosque there today is still popularly called the dome of the rock.

It's possible that Jesus alludes to all this, but Peter is not a new Abraham, and does not stand in the place of God. However, gathering these thoughts together we do come to understand that Peter, even Peter, was a worthy foundation for the church to be built on.

When we talked about Peter walking on water I said that Peter was always ready to copy Jesus and to go where he went — if Jesus is truly the rock, Peter, the imitator, is a solid rock too. The catholic church uses this line to justify naming Peter as the first pope. For that reason alone this is a hugely important passage in shaping the future history of the church.

The Gates of Hades will not overcome it — meaning the church. Hades is the Greek equivalent of Sheol, which means the pit or grave — without distinction regarding heaven or hell. Jesus says not that Peter would never die, but that the church will never die.

And Peter is granted the keys to the kingdom of heaven. I'm not sure we should read this too literally. Is he gatekeeper? Or manager? Why are the keys plural not singular? It doesn't matter, so much as Jesus entrusts Peter with authority. The contrast is Matthew 23:13, when Jesus says: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You *shut* the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to."

This contrast is quite illuminating — the scribes and pharisees are putting God's rule out of reach to ordinary people, telling them they must do more and follow stricter patterns of ritual and law. By doing so they give the impression that God is remote, disinterested, beyond our reach.

What then should Peter do? Quite the opposite! Peter holds the keys because *his* mission is to go out and welcome everyone into the kingdom! To fling open the doors! To let them know how *accessible* God is, through Jesus Christ. You don't have to commit to a life of fasting and religious observance. But you must seek out Jesus, and be bowled over at his grace to you, and to yearn to follow in his footsteps, just like Peter.

In this passage we have declared with Peter that Jesus is the Messiah the son of the living God. And Declared with Jesus that Peter is the rock on whom the church is founded. We know who they are. Who are we?

We are Peter's successors, fellow imitators of Jesus. Let's not feel too grand about this — we are only humble, and we know it. But we are also afforded that same responsibility and privilege. While the scribes and pharisees kept people from knowing God with their petty legalism, we must follow Peter in *opening up* faith to others, *widening* 'the narrow way' and showing them the good and loving God. That shouldn't be that difficult — it's not a hard sell! But it is, to some extent at least, a role that each of us has — to know God better, and to make him better known.

We don't get a CMG as a reward. Unless that stands for 'committed member of the gang', or something. But it's not about doing the honours is it? Because the invitation is all the honour we need.

Amen.      SDG.