

Matthew 16:13-20
A revelation of reality

Back when I was a kid, it was really quite satisfying being a Brit. You opened your

Overhead: school atlas

– though probably a slightly old version, I now realise – and a lot of the globe was still coloured in that rosy pink. The glorious British Empire, upon which, it used to be said, the sun never set. Although various of these colonies, I subsequently found, *weren't* “ours” any more, in any realistic sense of the word. Goodness, when

Overhead: QE2

dies, it's still unclear whether they might even elect someone from one of those places to take over as Head of the Commonwealth.

But as well as the school atlas, I also had a

Overhead: Readers' Digest Atlas of the World

And this had other interesting maps in it, as well. I was more interested in the map showing the depth of the oceans, but I do remember noticing another world map showing the world religions. And, once again so comforting, there seemed to be more of the globe coloured “Christian” than anything else, and the numbers in one corner confirmed it. So very nice to be part of the majority, and feel somehow in charge and

Overhead: top dog

British *Christian* bulldog

But I don't think Jesus would have been very impressed with my conclusion. The passage starts off with a question from Jesus about what the popular views of the day were. And yet he didn't make much comment on his disciples' answers. What the man in the street thought didn't really matter. They are not any kind of authority on it.

Instead, Jesus focuses on *them*, those disciples. What's *their* take? And yet even what they say, glorious though it is, is only glorious because it lines up with what *is*, what God himself declares to be true.

But because they have arrived at this perception of truth, **Jesus now gives his disciples a glimpse of the future of their discipleship, based upon the revelation concerning his own person.**

Excuse the almost tacky alliterated headings for today, but it seems to me to work for this passage:

the perceptions of Christ
the person of Christ
the promises of Christ

■ the perceptions of Christ (13-15)

You might remember from the past couple of times we've been visiting Matthew's Gospel, that Jesus has been spending quite a bit of his time in Gentile territory, rather than Jewish. Last time, it's written as if he had only just arrived in Jewish territory, when this peculiar mixture of Pharisees and Sadducees arrive to give him a bit of a kicking.

And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan. And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.

(Matthew 15:39-16:1)

After a very curt discussion, he leaves, back across the Sea of Galilee again, out of range of any Jewish authorities.

So he left them and departed. When the disciples reached the other side, ...

(Matthew 16:4-5)

And now he is going even further away, into decidedly pagan lands.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, ...

(Matthew 16:13)

So this is twenty-five miles north of the Sea of Galilee, to the foothills of Mount Hermon - so tall it has snow on its peaks all year round. The source of the river Jordan is around here. But that's not all. I didn't just mean "distant countryside" when I said "pagan" here. There's religion here, not just physical geography. These slopes are filled with various shrines to various so-called gods. The cave where one source of that eventual Jordan emerges houses a shrine, to "Pan and the Nymphs". From that, you get the name for the cave, the *Paneion*, and the region around it *Paneas*. 2000 years later it's called Baniyas.

And there's the big town in the region, too, rebuilt in the early years AD by Philip the tetrarch, named *Caesarea* after the emperor Augustus. And since other cities had been designed *Caesarea* as well, this one was distinguished from those by the addition of *Philippi* ... "of Philip".

There are all these traditional so-called gods ... and there are these emperors who were also aspiring gods. It wouldn't be many decades until disciples of Jesus Christ could be sent to their deaths for refusing to acknowledge that *Caesar is Lord*.

So this is such an appropriate place for Jesus to ask this particular question. Where does "the Son of man" - that's one of Jesus' favourite code phrases for himself - fit into this scheme? Is he Premier League or "little league"? Or is he in a class of his own? And even if so, is he a lone runner on a long-distance race trying to catch up with a leading group?

It is all so *very* modern-day, in this regard. The world is insisting that everything is "true", in at least some vague sense of the word. Yes, X can be god. And so can Y. And Z. And God can be personal, or impersonal, or above-personal; all of those mutually contradictory descriptions can all be true at the same time. It's not for us to try to insist that one is truer than any of the others.

Well, that's the theory, at least. But Jesus decides to test the waters. It looks as if he is using one of his

Overhead: Millionaire

life-lines. Time to ask the audience.

... he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

(Matthew 16:13)

What are the current perceptions? What's today's trending answer? Where is the clever money going? *Gimme the goss!*

And, perhaps not surprisingly, there's a variety of answers doing the rounds. Notice that the disciples wisely include only the complimentary answers. Some of Jesus' opponents had other ideas about him!

And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

(Matthew 16:14)

John the Baptist, raised from the dead? Quite a complimentary idea, perhaps. Herod Antipas had had that idea, too, you might remember - though in his case based more on superstitious fear. Elijah? That's quite a biggie, too, as there was something about *him* coming around again before God did something really remarkable:

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes."

(Malachi 4:5)

So, quite a few candidates. But do you think Jesus was really after the information about who the local bookies' favourite was for who he might turn out to be? Or has he chosen this as the perfect place, with that almost literal pantheon by way of backdrop

Overhead: ... pick a god, any god

to make a very specific teaching point? Hasn't he done this so cleverly, once again? Opening up the conversation so very easily - we could perhaps learn from that, couldn't we? Ask what people are thinking. What are perceived as the current options? And then spin the question around. Never mind *them*. What about *you*? Don't *you* have an opinion on this point?

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

(Matthew 16:15)

And this is even more sudden and shocking and forceful, the way it was originally said. We've got the standard English word order here, but a bit more literally, it is "*You*, though, who do (see the even stronger emphasis here now) *you* say that I am?"

Folks, do *you* hide behind "people say", rather than, "*I* think"? Isn't it strange that nowadays we can all have our opinions about politics and sport and all sorts of other

things, but your faith is somehow thought too personal to be politely discussed or enquired about? Why is it that people react so violently against this?

Or maybe I should do what Jesus did, and flip this around and address not just "people", but *you*. You didn't object when I asked you for your views about

Overhead: Brexit

So how come you object if I ask you about your opinion on Jesus Christ? Folks, how come that *even in church*, we will talk about all sorts of stuff in today's news ... but are so reluctant to let the conversation move on to Jesus and *you*?

■ **the person of Christ (16)**

I have to admit first, though, that we probably misread the scenario here a little bit, based on the start of this verse

Simon Peter replied, ...

(Matthew 16:16)

We need to remember that the question he is replying to is spoken in the plural. In the deep south of the USA, they'd translate it like this:

He said to them, "But who do y'all say that I am?"

(Matthew 16:15)

And I wonder if we're meant not so see Peter's answer as the typical impetuous answer, by the guy who just

Overhead: couldn't keep his mouth shut

but instead as the result of the disciples

Overhead: getting together in a huddle

to think this through together. Because I think we're meant to see a bit of a contrast here with what has gone before in Matthew's Gospel. The answer that Peter comes out with is not totally new. Right after Jesus (and Peter ... temporarily) walked on the water ...

And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

(Matthew 14:32-33)

But there - consider the context - they had just been scared within an inch of their lives. They were right in what they said, of course, and they had grown some from when, after a previous Sea of Galilee incident, their response was ...

And the men marvelled, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?"

(Matthew 8:27)

But here, at Caesarea Philippi, the guys have a chance to get together without all the fear adrenaline coursing through their bodies, to think seriously how they should reply to Jesus. Who *do* they think he is, really? Based on all they have seen over the last couple of years, what *do* they make of Jesus? Does he really rate what most people think of as his surname?

And so perhaps it is now Peter not answering just for himself, but at least to some extent as the spokesman of the group. From what Jesus says in a moment, maybe Peter is the one who first dared to propose this answer, the Christ ... but they've considered it together ... on reflection ... well, yes, this *does* fit the bill. *So, go on, Peter, you speak up and say it!*

Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

(Matthew 16:16)

Goodness, you really couldn't get much more emphatic, the way this has been written in the original language. Just as "you" (or "y'all") was stressed in Jesus' question, it's the same in Peter's answer: *you*. And what we call technically the "definite article", our English word "the" - the word that specifies *this* instead of another - is there *four* times: it's literally

the Christ, the son of the God the living one.

Is this Jesus just one among many? You really couldn't get a much more definite answer than this? Pan is no god at all. Caesar is not Lord. And Jesus is not just some kind of heavenly messenger. He has been sent by the one and only true God, but as his *son* - watch out for that in a later parable. And because of that special calling, just like OT prophet and priests and kings, he has been anointed (or *christ-ed*, using the root of the Greek word) for what is a unique role.

It's a role that the disciples still have quite a bit to learn about - as we will find out as we read on - but these guys are starting to catch the scent here. They're following not just a rabbi, a teacher ... but *the* Christ, *the* son of *the* God *the* living one.

Folks, can you see this is dynamite nowadays too? The world insists on a level playing field. All religions must be considered equal. All truths are relative, nothing is absolute and absolutely true - which the world *absolutely* insists upon. But what Matthew writes here, what the Bible has said all along, insists that we worship *the* Christ, *the* son of *the* living God.

... we Christians cannot surrender either the finality or the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. There is simply nobody else like him; his incarnation, atonement and resurrection have no parallels. In consequence, he is the one and only mediator between God and the human race. This exclusive affirmation is strongly, even bitterly, resented. It is regarded by many as intolerably intolerant. Yet the claims of truth compel us to maintain it, however much offence it may cause.

John Stott, Authentic Christianity (1995)

As we read that John Stott quote, you might well say, Yes, of course. *It is so obvious. The miracle of his birth, and his death, and his resurrection. How can people not see this? What don't they get it?*

Yes, it is logical. But it is also spiritual, and it is a gift from God if you see it. Mere intellect won't bring you to this conclusion.

And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven."

(Matthew 16:17)

So if *you* don't really get it, yes, of course, read this stuff over and over. But can I suggest that you pray for God to do what is sometimes sung as a simple chorus:

Open my eyes, Lord; I want to see Jesus

You need to move on from the various possible perceptions of Christ, to the true person of Christ. And then, consider

■ the promises of Christ (17-20)

There's some tough stuff before we finish, this morning. Some of these following words have been debated down through the centuries. We'll come back and discuss some of the detail this evening, if you like, but let's open the box and see what's inside now. There's some glorious stuff here! There's the rock, the church, the gates of hell, and the keys of the kingdom. But one at a time!

The rock

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock ..."

(Matthew 16:18)

The Catholics, I guess you will know, regard Peter as "the rock" upon which the church is built. They claim he was the first bishop of Rome, and that his successors retain pre-eminence over all other churches. Personally, I think that the Rome link is historically difficult to prove, and quite how they get the pre-eminence thing from this verse, I'm just not convinced of. One thing I *am* sure of, though, is that there is some word-play going on here that doesn't translate with total clarity.

So consider the word

Overhead: "petrified"

We usually use it as a metaphor. We say someone is not just scared, but scared *stiff*. Literally, the word means "turned to stone". If you visit Portreath beach at extremely low tides, there are supposed to be the remains of a

Overhead: petrified forest

that you can see there. I can't ever remember seeing it myself, but I remember my Mum saying she had seen them. That *petr-* word stem comes from the Latin word for "stone". There's a name you could translate as

Overhead: Rocky

and that's Petros ... or in modern English, Peter. Can you see how that word-play just *has* to be significant here in Matthew's Gospel?

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock ..."

(Matthew 16:18)

I think it's that Peter is finally living up to this nickname that Jesus had earlier given him.

He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter).

(John 1:42)

Finally, Peter the impetuous, Peter the one who so often opened his mouth before putting his brain into gear, has come out with something of solidity and substance and weight. *Here*, is Jesus saying, *is something we can start to build upon*. To a certain extent, in the early days of the church, Peter would be one of the founding fathers, that's clear from Scripture. You could say that the church *was*, in some limited sense, built upon him ... and others. But those words that Peter spoke, that recognition of who Jesus is ... *that* is clearly something absolutely fundamental to it all, as well.

In a few decades, Peter would die. You can debate whether he had any successors with apostolic authority bequeathed upon them over West in Rome, if you like. But that testimony to Jesus has persisted among the followers of Jesus until this day.

The church

"... I will build my church, ..."

(Matthew 16:18)

We probably think all too formally about that word *church*. We think buildings, quite possibly. Or something like "the organisation that Jesus founded". We get the word "ecclesiastical" from the Greek word, all to do with rituals and liturgy and robes and formality, but the word had a very much more down-to-earth usage way back when Matthew wrote. It was simply a gathering. It could be organised or it could be spontaneous. It was even used to describe an impending riot in Ephesus:

Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.

(Acts 19:32)

It's tempting to say that there are some churches around nowadays that that could apply to, but that would be a bit mean!

But the bottom line is that this is a common-or-garden word, which has grown and changed in the telling. And we need to remember that when we "do church". It is at heart a meeting together of people in the name of Jesus.

So some of the things that we most associate with "church" might have not featured at all in the mind of Jesus as he says those words. Ritual and robes and rows of hideously uncomfortable seats ...? Seriously? You think that's the kind of stuff he is talking about

here? Did you realise that in the early days of church buildings, there were *no* seats. I suspect the meeting literally lasted until people until people couldn't stand any more.

But that counted as much as church with pews or church with chairs or even church in your own living room, people meeting together in the name ... *and in the presence* ... of Jesus Christ.

That's why I am not *totally* obsessed with our getting back into the building once the Lockdown lifts. What we are doing now, as far as I can see, *is* still church. Just as it was and probably still is in various places around the world, where believers gather out in the woods, under the stars, the only place they dare meet with a substantial chance that they won't be spied upon by a repressive state. If their version of communion is to eat a grape each - that's all they can dare, on pain of imprisonment and likely death at the hands of the state – then *that*, I am sure Jesus would say, still counts as a *Holy Communion*.

The gates of hell

"... and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

(Matthew 16:18)

Isn't that an awesome promise! I've heard it suggested that there was some particular cave in this area of Caesarea Philippi, I think it was with some resident priestess or something like that, giving oracles, the typical woolly prophecies that can be taken all sorts of ways, but which convince people who already believe that they have heard something revelatory and profound. And this cave, so this line goes, was called "the gates of hell". Well, it *could* be, though I've not seen this in any of the books I've read recently, so it might also be a myth that has done the rounds courtesy of the Internet.

Folks, do be careful of stuff that you get on your screens with startling, alarming new discoveries. There are some unkind people out there who just seem to delight in spreading unfounded scare stories or yes, even President Trump might be correct at times, fake news, and they can target it to specially jangle Christians' chains. It doesn't do the Gospel and favours if you and I believe every story we come across without properly checking it. If it seems too good to be true, it probably is - apart from the Gospel itself. If it seems too shocking to be true ... is also probably is ... *not* true, I mean. Or at least not completely.

So I'm just mentioning that there is that possibility that Jesus' words are particularly targeted at something in the neighbourhood. But even if there wasn't, even if this is just a verbal image that Jesus made up on the spot, you can still see what it's saying, can't you?

Or can we? I think we typically *miss* a good deal of what this is saying. We can take this to mean *the church will survive*. That would follow logically, wouldn't it? If it is *Jesus* doing the building of this *assembled people*, let's call it, ... not human committees or specially talented and gifted leaders, but Jesus himself ... then doesn't it stand to reason that something *Jesus* would build will survive the centuries?

And of course, the answer to that has to be Yes. But what Jesus says here isn't about survival, but triumph. Think all those battlefield images you've ever seen, in books or films or whatever. I know that in the Lord of the Rings you get

Overhead: trees walking

but when have you ever seen *gates* walking? The whole point about gates in this imagery is that they are *defensive* measures. They can be

Overhead: massively fortified

and can seem impregnable. You would think that even the mightiest

Overhead: battering ram

could never prise them open. So what Jesus has to be saying here is that *his church*, his people assembled in some sense down through the ages, will penetrate the defensive perimeter of Hades (whatever that precisely stands for). That foul city will *fall*. And I think we can push the image a little. Not so much that the city will be plundered, but that captives held there will be liberated.

Now I think we need to get this different outlook into our thinking. My fear is that during lockdown, we've become even more inward-looking. We've had to focus on getting something running in place of physical meeting, and we've done that. But what we do is even more hidden than usual. Nobody sees us leaving to go to church; nobody hears the guys discussing

Overhead: Screwtape Letters

in some local coffee shop; we just

Overhead: log in

from the comforts of home. Folks, where are these *gates of Hades* in your current experience? Is there any enemy territory that we are starting to assault at all, or are those gates just standing untroubled, because we're now meeting safely and almost sweetly on Zoom.

I've recently heard of a group of pupils of my old secondary school wanting to get back in touch via Zoom, so a couple of times now I've met up with substantially aged faces of people, some of whom I knew tolerably well at school. Someone had shared pictures of the school football or rugby team, and I saw pictures of a very young looking Nick Smith. I've mentioned that *his mum used to come to my church*. When people have asked, *So, Peter, what are you doing nowadays?* I've been able to answer that I left chemistry research 15 years ago to come back to Cornwall and work for a local church.

Maybe something will come of this, maybe not. I can't say this is a huge battering ram *thudding* on the gates of Hades, but I pray that it *might* be of use for the kingdom of heaven. It's an opportunity, maybe. *Any* time you're in some kind of interaction with someone who is not a believer, it's an opportunity. If you have that moment when you can share something about what you do, who you are ... can't we introduce *something* that speaks of Jesus Christ?

Or are we content to let the gates of Hades stand proudly open and untroubled, despite the promise of Jesus that no matter how securely locked and barricaded, *they ... will ... fall?*

And finally

The keys of the kingdom

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

(Matthew 16:19)

Now this is a bit tricky to try to finish with quickly. It's rather obscure to us nowadays. But if you were a 1st-century person familiar with rabbis, it wouldn't be so complex. It's the way they expressed in their teachings what things were permitted or forbidden. They "bound" some things, and "loosed" others.

And a key, I would have thought, is in ideal symbol of just this. You can use it to lock or to unlock, as appropriate.

Now the Catholics will point to this "you" being *singular*. See, *that's the Pope's special authority to make rules!* If the Pope says priests can't marry, or Christians can't use contraceptives ... look, it's "bound in heaven" because of what he has ordained!

But I don't think we need to take it that way. It's Peter who spoke to Jesus, and now Peter is being answered by Jesus. *Peter, you have started to live up to that name. That key understanding of who I am is something that I can build on. And the actions of people like you, who believe the same things - these people around you - will profoundly affect the world around you.*

Actually, the precise wording here is not **(highlight)** "shall be", but "shall have been". And I wonder if this implies that it isn't so much that heaven falls into line with what is bound or loosed on earth, but that the decisions taken on earth are an expression or a revelation of what has first been ordained in heaven.

So when this Peter - and maybe it's particularly significant that it's this Peter, to whom this was said - is sent for by a Gentile wanting to find out the truth about Jesus, Peter's actions at that point will affect the mission of the whole church. Will it remain targeted on the Jews, or will it henceforth be open to *Gentiles* as well? What was Peter's decision? Did he bind or loose?

First, he was given repeated a vision, concluding with the initially rather cryptic words

"What God has made clean, do not call common."

(Acts 10:15)

And then there is a knock at the door. Will you come to the house of a Gentile? And he does. And he tells them about Jesus.

"To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

(Acts 10:43)

And then heaven intervenes:

While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.

(Acts 10:44)

Question: it looks as if these are believers. But they're Gentiles. Can we baptise them? Peter, will you keep this bound, or will you loose it? But the Holy Spirit has already spoken. "Whatever you loose on earth *shall have been loosed in heaven.*"

Then Peter declared, "Can anyone withhold water for baptising these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And he commanded them to be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ.

(Acts 10:46-48)

Folks, for us too, the calling is to roll out heaven's agenda here on earth. In our individual lives. In our homes and neighbourhoods and workplaces and strung-round-the-world-Social-Media-friends'-lists. How we do that will depend on our perceptions of Jesus Christ. Is he one of many, or the one and only, the very definite

"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

(Matthew 16:16)

If you have that view of his person, will you hear and trust his promises? That his people will get out there and bring his light into dark places, and breaking the shackles of the bound. It was the mission of Messiah – or *Christ* – right from the start.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

(Luke 4:18-19)

If that has been proclaimed in heaven ... what are we doing with it, here on this little part of earth?