



What about you?

Matthew 16:13-20

There are moments when we have to declare (at least to ourselves) what our real feelings or convictions are in a given situation. Sometimes these are open declarations—but often private.

- When a relationship develops into loving a person
- When something in the family or a close friend is clearly wrong
- In the current discussion on marriage
- In our attitudes to racism... mounting evidence of its presence across the world.

I am sure we can all identify moments when our own perspective is sought and we need to marshal our answers to difficult questions.

Jesus Christ has travelled to the area of Caesarea Philippi. He appears to have taken his disciples on this trip, rather more northerly than some of his journeys around the Lake. In the previous section, Jesus has been warning against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. This all centred on the theme of bread, previously concentrated in the feeding of the crowds. We are told the disciples forgot to take bread and perhaps he was teaching them on the boat.

Caesarea Philippi was quite a long distance to travel on foot, about forty minutes by car today, and so such a journey on foot would enable a great deal of conversation between Jesus and the disciples. These would be special and intimate occasions for the disciples.

- Times they would reflect upon later, after the death and resurrection of Jesus
- Moments when they would begin to join up the dots of what they had failed to understand
- Part of their growing understanding of what they were to face (v.12).

Caesarea Philippi stood at the headwaters of the River Jordan. If you were to go there, you would find that it flows out of a wall of rock, from a deep subterranean pool of immeasurable depth. This water sustained the Israelites and, most significantly, water where, as it flowed downstream, Jesus was baptised by John.

This passage in Matthew is treated in a broadly similar way in Mark. However, we could describe Mark's account of the incident as being an event on which the whole gospel turns—for, following their time here, Jesus coins a completely new vocabulary about the suffering Son of Man. In Matthew, it is not quite as pronounced, for Matthew has already shown us quite unambiguously who Jesus is. Michael Green observed, "But it is important, just the same, in a section where he is gathering together matters of great significance about Jesus the Messiah."

The importance of the question, "What about you?" is at the heart of the gospel message. The mounting aspects of the questioning are found in verses 13-15.

For me, there are three features of this passage which relate to this incident:

There is the importance of the location

As I have already indicated, the setting is about 25 miles north-east of the Sea of Galilee. It was the domain of Herod Philip, which he had named Caesarea in honour of the Emperor. One writer commented, "It paid to do little things like that!" Today it has returned to an earlier name 'Banias'.



- Jesus and his disciples sat in the shadow of Mount Hermon, where many of the great religious leaders of Israel had experienced God's presence
- A grotto under the mountain was reputed to mark the birthplace of Pan, a legendary god of nature
- Considered by many to be a famous fertility symbol in ancient paganism
- Therefore, a place of 'religious' importance... and a great temple was built to worship the Emperor.

Jesus and the disciples were certainly well aware of the link with the River Jordan. The location takes on further significance as we consider the fact that it is now a place of questioning. The revelation of who Jesus is becomes the foundational authority of the Christian community.

There are what we call 'kairos' moments, as we begin to understand—and this was certainly one such occasion for the disciples—and undoubtedly for Peter.

There are countless aspects of the questioning about Jesus' identity:

- The wider perception of people's notions of who he is
- The exploration of Peter's confession
- The formation of the church as a confessional community.

The wealth of this passage is such that you can move on to a contemporary examination of our understanding of who Jesus is. The questioning takes on a highly-charged element because of the location.

Today, we talk about living in a global village and the multiplicity of faiths/religions is considered by some to be the fatal blow to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

It is easy to accept that the seductions of syncretism are new. Not so! The importance of the location here underlines the debate about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

The first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches was asked what he thought would be the greatest peril facing the church. And he replied with prophetic insight: "Syncretism, it is a far more dangerous challenge to the Christian church than atheism will ever be."

We see the impact of this in so many ways today. Christianity is often considered arrogant if it questions the ideas and philosophies of others. We must avoid arrogance, but there is no doubt whatsoever that our understanding of Jesus Christ is bound up with our understanding of truth. Jesus Christ is an enigma to many and even some Christians are reluctant to embrace an understanding of him if it questions the correctness of others.

Jesus conducted an opinion survey amongst the disciples about who people thought him to be. There were various opinions, though most thought him to be a prophet. As Jesus conducted his ministry, witnesses were constantly asking, "Who is he?" "Where does he get his authority or his power from?" This might be considered to be the question that troubled Pontius Pilate.

The question can never be answered philosophically or solved in the same way that one might investigate a crime. The link of confession to faith is critical. At this location, the question was being asked of Jesus and his disciples and, in turn, the question is asked of every one of us.

There is the significance of Peter

Peter, who will be called to give leadership to the church, is on a journey himself. By the time this account is first being penned, he is undoubtedly in a place of authority.

The Roman Catholic Church stands on this passage. It is here that the concept of apostolic authority is based. While Protestants don't affirm this particular understanding, we must not diminish the role and significance of Peter.



The titles that Peter gave to Jesus are worthy of consideration:

- Son of Man, the Messiah and the Son of the Living God (v.v. 13, 16)
- None of these titles are new
- But the bringing together in one place certainly is.

We could analyse each description:

'Son of Man' is a form of Aramaic speech which might not be particularly special, but is a useful self-ascription. It may of course relate to the Old Testament picture in Daniel (7:14) where there is talk of an everlasting kingdom with power and glory. The ambiguity of the title matched the ambiguity of the Person of Jesus. As Green put it, "That's why he liked it. It could mean nothing or everything."

'Messiah' or Christ' is closely aligned to the concept of 'the anointed one'. This is so important that it becomes firmly associated with Jesus as to be almost like a surname. In Judaism, it refers to the One who would come and fulfil the hopes of the nation. Traditionally, three people were anointed: prophets, priests and kings. Jesus fulfils the expectations of all three roles. He is like:

- the priest—putting people in touch with God
- the prophet—speaking of what God is like
- the king—a sign of God's rule over people.

At this important location, the significance of Peter is in his recognition of just who Jesus is. The track record of Peter before and after this moment is far from perfect. A few verses later, Jesus identifies what he is saying with Satan (v.28) for setting his mind on human rather than divine things.

The Christian community is built upon the rock of Peter's confession. All around the place where this confession is taking place is the importance of rock. Some of it is the rock of religious life and some the rock of political power, but it will be 'the Rock' who confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord that will provide the basis for the long-term stability and strength of the Christian Church, as it has lasted throughout history.

Peter appears to be given prominence in this passage and two things need to be said in relation to this:

- Peter would very likely have been held in high regard in the church to which Matthew is writing
- Peter speaks or acts representatively for the disciples on a number of occasions and appears to do so here.

Jesus Christ gave to Peter and the other followers the keys of the kingdom of heaven (v.v. 17-19). It points to the fact that the Christian Church, which they will help to shape, is the gatekeeper to those who would seek to enter into the actual presence of God.

One writer concluded a reflection on the passage in this way: "Of the innumerable miracles Jesus performed during his earthly ministry, perhaps none was greater than the miracle of inviting twelve poor, pigeon-holed, impudent persons into community and empowering them to live into a new identity."

Today in these days of unprecedented wealth, education and technology, we also are called to live into God's transforming power.

The insight which challenges all of us

Peter made the right decision and gave the right answer to Jesus. The Lord openly agreed to Peter's confession, admitting in effect to being the longed-for Messiah. One can only begin to imagine the sheer excitement for Peter and the band of disciples, who would want to share this news with the world.



Peter's confession is distinctive, in that it is Jesus who presses him for it:

- There is an urgency in our confession
- Thought-through theology is important, not just experience
- Theology and Spirituality are two sides of the same encounter with God in Jesus Christ.

However, Jesus forbade the disciples from talking about this until later (v.20). Why? We might ask ourselves.

- They would need to learn about the nature of his Messiahship
- They would need to learn about the nature of true discipleship.

The question "What about you?" remains the most urgent, relevant and theological question we must address. Looking at history, people have come to their differing conclusions about Jesus:-

- Ernest Renan, French writer—Jesus, a sentimental idealist
- Bruce Barton, American businessman—greatest salesman that ever lived
- William Hirsch, Jewish scholar and writer—Jesus conformed to the clinical pattern of paranoia
- 'Superstar', 'Man for Others' and so many more.

Peter offers us the title 'Son of the Living God'.

The place of Peter, in the story of the Church, has been overtaken by Paul. However, I think both are supremely important, but there are specific qualities about Peter:

- impetuosity and integrity
- despair and dynamism
- denial and dedication.

The journey of Simon to Peter is a challenge to every one of us! In the scriptures that follow Peter's confession in Matthew's Gospel, we are given an insight into how things will change (v.21). It is quite clear that Peter had not really grasped all that Jesus was saying (v.22) and the rebuke of Peter by Jesus is far from easy to listen to (v.23).

The power of Pentecost would soon be let loose in the lives of those open to God. What a change we can observe in Peter's life as he journeys through the cross and the resurrection to become the distinctive leader of the community which formed the earliest church. This power, given in the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, took hold of people and made them so very different. What happened to Peter has happened to millions of others!

The person to whom the challenge is presented is you and me, where we are. We may not be called to hold great office, or we may. But just as certainly as Peter, we need to see the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.

We live in a world of conflicting religious claims. No issue challenges the modern mind more than the authenticity of the founder of Christianity. As John Gestner delightfully put it in *Reason or Faith*:

"To the artist, he is one altogether lovely. To the educator, he is the Master Teacher. To the philosopher, he is the Wisdom of God. To the lonely, he is brother and sister. To the sorrowful, a Comforter. To the bereaved, the Resurrection and the Life—and to the sinner, he is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world."



This is a pivotal moment both for Jesus and Peter. Each is being prepared for what lies ahead. Very soon Jesus will be transfigured before his inner-circle of disciples of whom Peter is now identified as the leader (17:1-13).

How would you answer the question that Jesus is posing to his disciples? The more general question moves to a directly personal one— “Who do you say I am?”

I conclude with some words that take the question a little further:

If he should come today and find my hand so full

Of future plans, however fair,

In which my Saviour has no share,

What would he say?

If he should come today and find my love so cold,

My faith so very weak and dim

I had not even looked for him,

What would he say?

If he should come today and find that I had not told

One soul about my heavenly Friend

Whose blessings all my way attend,

What would he say?

If he should come today, I would be glad,

Remembering that he died for all

And none through me had heard his call,

What would he say?

You see, the question invites a still deeper enquiry. In this year, 500 years since Martin Luther made public his significant 95 theses on the door of All Saints’ Church, Wittenberg, we recall he said, “I care not whether he be the Christ, but is he the Christ in you?”

Therefore, I think the question for all of us is, “Is he?”