

Matthew 16:13-20 (24th August 2014)

In pairs, ask each other question: who are you? (30 secs each)

Wonder what responses were: who said name? Age? Where lived? Where from? What job you did? Your marital status and whether you had kids?

Interesting challenge isn't it: how do you define yourself? Look at some of those categories: some are descriptive, others go deeper and say more about your history. Most of them say something about how you see yourself, or rather what is important to you, what defines you.

Today's main passage is all about identity. Famous moment when Jesus takes his disciples to Caesarea Philippi and asks them two simple questions. The first is more or less an introduction: who do people say I am? The second is more direct: who do you say I am? (SLIDE)

Who do you say I am? Probably the most fundamental question of human existence: who is Jesus? Quite a bold statement – but truly the identity of Jesus really is the key to everything else. Say the creed later (not usual, but reason for it) – and there's a reason for that. At heart is this simple assertion: I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord. That's what Christians believe isn't it? Jesus is the *Christ*, the Messiah – i.e. the rescuer. He's God's *Son*. And as we'll see, that's what Peter confesses in our passage, for the first time. And that means he's the third thing: he's Lord i.e. he's the boss, he's the one we were made to worship, and he has the right to our love and obedience.

In other words: 'who is Jesus' is the one question you (and every human being) will need to answer in your life – only way to understand what God is like. He's come to earth in the form of His Son, the rescuer of humanity – Jesus.

Think of it like this. How do we know if there's a God, & if so what he is like? 2 ways to answer it

- FIRST (SLIDE) – start with all 'outside' questions – work round eventually to Jesus
- SECOND (SLIDE) – start with Jesus. Get that answer straight in your head and that becomes the lens through which you look at everything else.

4 gospels, and all of them address this basic question – who is Jesus? And that's the question Jesus poses for us today: who do you say I am? (SLIDE)

If Jesus just a good human being, or a good teacher, or a failed revolutionary, or a hippy wandering around in sandals, then you can admire him, or laugh at him. But basically you don't need to do anything else. But if he is who the Peter says he is, what we confess whenever we say the creed, then he's someone you need to know, someone you can't ignore, someone who can, does, and will change your life. This matters.

So much of life revolves around questions of identity – who we are, who God is, who Jesus is. But today's culture makes thinking about identity especially hard, for two reasons:

- Consumer mindset – nowadays we can create own identity. In the old days, who you *were* defined what you did, where you lived, and so on. Could be quite constricting: class system, social hierarchy. But also a sense of security in it – people knew who they were. Today, it's different – we define our own identities. Most obvious in teenage culture: you can be an emo or a goth or whatever, and wear the right clothes, right friends etc and create that identity. And then when you want to change it: just need new wardrobe, new playlist on your ipad and new set of friends. We are what we own.
Maybe is much more liberating for us – but I think it leaves many of us feeling rootless, shiftless. Who are we, really?
- Second and related issue for us is how pragmatic we are as a society. What we're most interested in is what works. As a church leader once said a few years back: 'First we said it's true, therefore it works. Then we said, it works therefore it's true. Now it works and that's all there is to it.' This might be a practical way to live: but again it makes it hard to ask questions of identity. Identity runs deeper, it goes to the core of who we are. We don't just exist on the basis of what works: what is it that makes us *us*?

So I think many of us instinctively feel shifty when we come to this amazing passage and hear Jesus addressing his friends directly: who do you say I am? I think many of us might have a little thought in the back of our heads: 'does it really matter? A name is just a label. What matters, Jesus is what you do, and let's be honest you do some really cool stuff. You heal people and raise the dead and turn water into wine, and you're great to be around and always taking us to new places. And I'm sure you're about to do a whole lot more, though we're not quite sure why you've brought us to Caesarea Philippi.'

And Jesus counters this – he doesn't say it directly, but I believe it runs through the meat of the text – and says: 'yes, but what I *do* tells you who I am.' And who is he?

Well some say: READ v14. In other words, a great human being. A great teacher, a spiritual leader, perhaps even a prophet or even, the forerunner of the really special one. That's the meaning of the Elijah reference, whom Malachi predicted would have to come before God rescued Israel. So a truly great person: but just a person.

And then we get to the crunch: 'what about you?' And at this point we might pause briefly and ask why here, in Caesarea Philippi, as far north as Jesus ever travelled, as far from Jerusalem as he ever was as an adult, in a place of great spiritual darkness, where Baal was worshipped and the pagan God Pan (where panic comes from). Why here, of all places? Literally a turning point: Jesus' relationship with the disciples can be split almost into two halves: who is Jesus? And then why did he come? This is the climax of the first half, they've journeyed this far: and Jesus asks them: who am I?

And Peter gives the right answer! READ v16. He's got it! Someone apart from the demons recognises Jesus for who he is, and human history will never be the same. Well, he's barely got it, we know what happens next when Jesus immediately starts talking about his death and Peter starts telling him off.

But from this point, they turn and head for Jerusalem (much clearer in Mark and Luke). It's like the first half of the journey is done, they've reached this point, and now they begin the second half, heading for the climax. And why Caesarea Philippi? Well, what better place to recognise the true source of light in a place of great spiritual darkness? The light has come, and he can shine even in this darkness!

But there's another good reason for being in CP. You see, it was built on a big rock (SLIDE), and we can imagine Jesus and the disciples standing on top of it. And what does Jesus say to Peter: READ v18. There's some clever imagery going on here: Jesus is saying to Peter, look at this rock – 'well, mate, that's you. And I'm going to build something special on it.' In fact, you might like to know that 700 years later we know there was a church on the rock of CP.

But Peter has a new role. And just briefly, I want to point out a second question which is there in this passage. Our main focus today has been the question Jesus asks: who do you say I am? But there's another question: **who do I say you are?**

And Jesus has an answer for Peter, doesn't he? Peter, you're the rock. In fact, I'm going to change your name to Rock so you know this is the purpose I have for you, this is my call on your life. And that's what happens when we recognise who Jesus is: we also learn who we are. Who does Jesus say we are? Created by him, loved by him, with unique personality and talents and a unique call. This is who Jesus says we are: but we can only really live it if we *first* recognise who Jesus is.

There's a nice link to Isaiah 42 here. Main reason I chose passage is that when Peter says: 'you are the Messiah' i.e. the Anointed One, he's referencing all those prophecies and promises in the OT of the special one they were expecting – not Jose Mourinho, but The One, the one on whom God's Spirit rests – hence the 'anointed one'. And did you spot what the anointed one will do: he brings justice to the nations, renews his people, makes them a light to the rest of the earth, sets people free, basically does a new thing. This is what lies behind this story in Matthew. When Peter says 'you are the Messiah' – *this* is what he'll do, this is who he is.

But there's something else too: that strange phrase 'a bruised reed he will not break' (v3). The name Simon is very similar to the Hebrew word for 'reed'. And so Jesus says to his friend Simon: you know what, you were reedy, but I'm going to call you rocky. Simon the reed becomes Peter the rock. And of course Simon does get bruised, he denies Jesus the anointed one. But Isaiah 42 promises that 'a bruised reed he will not break.' Peter will be restored, and will go on to be the first leader of the early church. Amazing, eh? (PAUSE)

As I close.... Who do you say I am? Who is Jesus to you? Is he just a good teacher, a great man, but nothing more. Or is he, as Peter confesses, the Anointed One, humanity's rescuer, God himself. It's the most important question you will ever answer, and dare I say your eternal future depends on how you answer that question.

But in return, Jesus has another, wonderful question for you: who do I say you are? Confessing Jesus for who he is has huge consequences, not the least of which is a new purpose to your life. You may not become the rock on which Jesus builds his church, but Jesus wants to shape your identity so you know who you really are: a child loved by God, and who has a hope and a future, indeed a calling, a purpose. **Who are you? And who is he? (SLIDE – reflect)**