



Who do people say the Son of Man is?

Our gospel today continues Matthew's account of Christ's teaching and preaching. The way Matthew tells the story, after each great act of ministry, Jesus and his disciples travel to another place where there is a time of reflection on Jesus and his ministry.

I wonder sometimes if Matthew put the gospel together in this way so that when we have questions such as the Pharisees raised, and when we have doubts such as the disciples expressed, then Jesus speaks to us now as much as he speaks to his first century listeners.

Today's gospel is after an encounter with the Pharisees and Sadducees where they demanded a sign from heaven and after an occasion when his disciples misunderstood what Jesus was trying to tell them.

Maybe it was because the Pharisees and Sadducees were so blind and the disciples so slow to understand that he asked them, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

Jesus called himself the Son of Man because he was a human being like any other. Anyone who looked at him could see that he was a Jewish carpenter with a Galilean accent. Just another son of man like all the rest.

But of course, his teaching and his miracles meant that there were many rumours about. Some thought he was John the Baptist, or Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the other prophets come back from the dead. So Jesus wanted to test his disciples to see if they understood. "If people say I am John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah, then who do you say that I am?"

It was Simon Peter who answered, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God!"

Jesus was delighted. "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah!"

Simon the fisherman knew the truth when all the wise and learned Pharisees and Sadducees had no idea. Peter was not a clever man. I don't know if he could read or write. He was a fisherman so he knew a lot about fish and sailing a boat, but I don't know if he knew the Scriptures very well. Peter was not a clever man, but he was not stupid. He had seen what Jesus did, and heard what Jesus said, and walked where Jesus walked, and shared his food and drink.

He had heard Jesus' teaching and he had witnessed his miracles, but this was not the source of his knowledge. No human had told Simon Peter that Jesus was the Messiah, he had not figured it out for himself. The knowledge was given to him by God in heaven.

And this is how we, too, receive our belief in Jesus. We can be taught all our lives by wise and learned instructors; we can attend church every Sunday of our lives, and this is good and helpful; but in the end, our faith in Jesus and our belief that he is the Christ is given to us by God.

Jesus was delighted to see that Peter had received this gift from God.

The gift given to Peter was the gift of knowing who Jesus really is, the Messiah, the Christ.

And in return Jesus gave Peter a new identity. Because Peter understood who Jesus is, so he now understands himself. He is now Peter, and on this rock Christ "will build my church."



Of course Peter was unique. In all the lists of the apostles he is given first place, even though Andrew was the first to respond to Jesus' call. Peter is often the spokesman for the disciples, but he is also an example of human frailty; he is impulsive and foolish, he denied his Lord and repented, he was bold and afraid, just like anyone else.

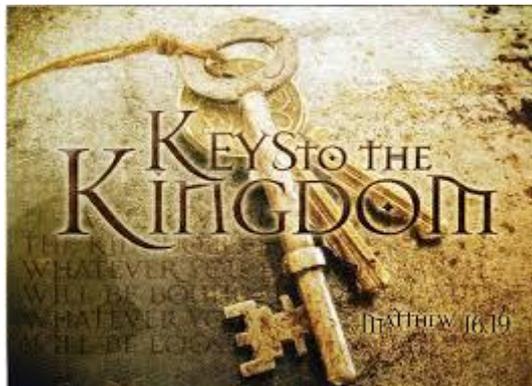
And for me, that is the clue. Peter is just like us and we are like Peter. In this passage, Peter stands as an example of all who turn to Christ. When we believe in our hearts and confess with our lips that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, then we are given a new identity. We are given the gift of knowing exactly who we are and what is our place in God's great plan. When we say,

"Jesus is Lord," then we are also asking, "Who am I?"

If we anything like Peter, and if Peter is the rock on which the church is built, then we are the living stones of which the church is built. And, when all is said and done, the church's one foundation is Jesus Christ our Lord, as the choir sang in the hymn. Jesus is the true foundation and Peter, the apostles and saints, living and departed are all, with us, essential parts of the building. This is the church, God's church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it!

That's a bold statement by Jesus, because we know only too well that the rocks we build on and the living stones we use are uneven and wobbly, just like Peter. And yet Jesus said that it will stand up to the worst assaults of Hell. We are God's church and if we hold to a true knowledge of Christ and a true knowledge of ourselves, then we can have confidence for the future.

Jesus knows what a shaky human foundation the church has, and yet he trusts it with the keys of heaven. Have



you ever thought – we are the keepers of the keys of the kingdom of heaven. We can open up and let people in, or we can turn the key and lock them out. What we do here on earth affects heaven as well. Those we lock out of the church are locked out of heaven, those we welcome are also welcomed into the kingdom of heaven. Every unkind or thoughtless word or action closes the door; every act of love and inclusion opens the gate.

Flesh and blood did not give this knowledge to Simon Peter, son of Jonah or to us. It was our Father in heaven who reveals the Messiah to us all. And it is the Messiah who has revealed to Simon Peter and to us the privilege and responsibility we have.

We are the rock on which the church is built, whatever and whoever we reject here in our world is rejected in heaven, and whatever and whoever we include is included.

Let us pray that we may have the grace to know Christ in our hearts as our Saviour and Lord; to know ourselves as Christ knows us, and to reach out to others to include them in God's love.

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