

Prayers

Opening prayer

We thank You, O Lord, for all the good things in the world. Save us from focussing on troubles and forgetting our blessings, give us the strength of spirit to trust in the promises of God, inspire us to be workers in Your Kingdom who serve others, and remake us in Your image according to Your great plan. Incarnate Christ, Your love conquers all; work in us now; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

Write down a list of what you perceive to be your everyday problems, whether they be of health, or problems with others, or indeed other spiritual problems. Pray through this list for as long as it takes for these mountains to become mole-hills.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the future of your country.** *Pray for revival within your country, and pray that God people will be willing to be God's agents in this work*
- *Give thanks to God for all the love you have received from others. Bring these things before the Lord and bring those who have loved you before the Lord. May true love inspire greatness within your soul.*
- *Pray for the international money markets, and pray that Godly people who work within this will be empowered to make godliness and honesty work for the good of all.*

Meditation

When in sorrow, because everything fails to satisfy the soul;
Lord Jesus, comfort and reassure ...

When in trouble, because facing the truth is harder than life;
Lord Jesus, cleanse and purify ...

When tempted, because the Evil One has found a foothold;
Lord Jesus, save and deliver ...

When forgetful, because nothing stays in an occupied mind;
Lord Jesus, prompt and remind ...

When in stress, because what was safe has grown insecure;
Lord Jesus, soothe and pacify ...

Thence remade, because the work of God is always sufficient;
Lord Jesus, fulfil Your purpose ... in me.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Matthew 16: 13-20

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?'

¹⁴ They replied,

'Some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets.'

¹⁵ But He asked them,

'who do you say that I am yourselves?'

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered,

'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

¹⁷ Jesus then said to him,

'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are "Peter", and on this "rock" I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'

²⁰ Then He strictly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that He was the Messiah.

Review

This is a most remarkable passage of Scripture, and it clearly describes a pivotal point both in the Gospel of Matthew and in Jesus' earthly life. After the difficulties of the conversation between Jesus and the disciples in yesterday's reading, today's story demonstrates how faith achieves what reasoning cannot. Jesus took the disciples to Caesarea Philippi where he asked them a straightforward question; what did people say about Jesus (60:13)? Then more crucially, what did they believe about him (16:15)? The disciples began, as previously, with a degree of misunderstanding (16:14). But it was Peter who said the famous words that broke the deadlock, saying '*you are the Messiah, the son of the living God*' (16:16). Jesus then praised Peter for his faith and made it very clear that this was what he wanted of His disciples (16:17-19).

In the Gospel of Matthew, a number of people have already confessed faith in Jesus during His ministry, and they did this by calling Him 'Lord' (8:6,21, 9:28 etc.) and even 'Son of God' (8:29, 14:33). However, the incident at Caesarea Philippi is the first one in which anyone spoke to Jesus using the title 'Messiah'.

Today, Christians say openly that Jesus is the Messiah, the 'Anointed One' of God; it is their common statement of faith. So despite the many things we might wish to say about Jesus, this confession of faith is essential, and it is also fundamental to the Bible narrative of Jesus' ministry. The Gospels of Mark (8:27-33) and Luke (9:18-22) record this same incident with only a few differences, and although John does have this story, it says clearly that faith is the sole purpose of the entire Gospel; '*These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God ...*' (John 20:31).

Today, we do not place so much store on people's names, so some will feel that this Scripture has little significance. But we must read this passage for what it meant to those for whom it was real, and it was no casual conversation; what Peter said changed everything. Jesus had shown the disciples the ministry God had given Him and He commissioned the disciples to do the same (10:1f.), but up to this point, they had merely done what they were told. God's purpose was not to establish His New kingdom by sheer missionary effort, it was to enable people to respond to the love of God. This is why the emphasis here is on who Jesus is rather than what He did.

When asked the question, the disciples reported to Jesus that other people thought he was one of a number of possible greats. Perhaps He was John the Baptist (16:14, see 11:2f. 14:1f.), perhaps He was Elijah (11:14), and Matthew records an interesting option found nowhere else, that some thought Him to be Jeremiah! All these theories had their merits in a world where people were actively concerned to discern the things of God. Of course, in the light of Peter's great statement of faith, all of them stand as mere relics of human reasoning, interesting of themselves, but simply pointing in the wrong direction.

Nevertheless, this was the first time that anyone had made a free and open confession about who Jesus was, and stated openly that He was God's Messiah (16:16)! Whilst Peter was not the first person to think that Jesus was the Messiah, he was the first to say so. His confession opens the door to every other believer who has subsequently placed his or her faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour; and although we are not saved because of what we have said, we are saved because we have placed our trust in Jesus, who is God's servant and the source of all hope for eternal life.

Incredibly, this testimony has come down to us from Peter, and for all who have made the same statement since his day until ours. Our faith today is therefore the fulfilment of Jesus' prophesy at Caesarea Philippi, when He declared that He would build His church on the 'rock' of Peter's faith (16:17-19). It is the model

human response to Christ, it is what God longs to hear on the breath of every human being, and it is the ultimate object of both evangelism and all other work done by the church throughout the world.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of this passage
- Caesarea Philippi – the place
- How does this passage fulfil Scripture?
- What was Jesus trying to do by asking His first question (16:13)?
- How did Peter make his famous statement of faith?
- What does Peter's blessing as 'Simon son of Jonah' mean?
- What did Jesus mean by saying He would build His church on a 'rock'?
- What did Jesus mean by the 'church'?
- What did Jesus mean by the 'keys of the Kingdom'?

Notes on the translation of this passage

V13 'who do people say that the Son of Man is?'

Some of the ancient manuscripts say 'who do people say that I, the Son of Man, am?' Nevertheless, most of the major texts do not have this addition of 'I' and although you may find some Bible translations have this, it is best to leave the text in its simplest form, as I have done here.

V20 'He was the Messiah'

The Greek word for Messiah is 'christos' meaning 'Christ'. If we remember that Matthew was writing in Greek about a conversation that in all likelihood would have taken place in Aramaic, it is clear that Jesus was commanding the disciples to refrain from proclaiming Him as Messiah to others. For this reason, I have translated 'Messiah', not 'Christ'.

In addition, some ancient manuscripts have 'Jesus was the Messiah' instead of 'He was the Messiah'. Because the placing of the word 'Jesus' in the manuscripts that have this word included is somewhat varied, it seems clear that it was a later addition to the text made perhaps, by scribal error.

Caesarea Philippi – the place

Jesus' route to Caesarea Philippi is interesting. He had turned away from Galilee towards Tyre and Sidon, before circling back to the Gentile regions of Galilee (15:21f), thus showing growing interest in ministering to the Gentiles (as we saw in yesterday's study). Today, Jesus has journeyed further east, to the far North East of the region, to Caesarea Philippi, a town built by the Judean ruler Herod Philip in honour of the Roman Emperor Tiberius Caesar. It seems strange that Jesus should go to this, because it had been set up as a centre for the worship of the god 'pan', the god who represented all the Roman gods, including the Emperor. Perhaps Jesus wanted to give a message to Gentile people, to say that he was true and only God, in whom all godliness could be found. Nevertheless, it was a useful place for Jesus to bring the disciples, being north of Galilee, where Jesus could no longer move about freely because of the large crowds.

How does this passage fulfil Scripture?

This passage is important because of its relationship to the whole Bible and the salvation history it contains. The theological disputes about what Jesus meant by what He said to Peter need to be looked at in the light of God's salvation plan for the whole world, and my own view of them is based upon a plain reading of the text, rather than any standard church dogma. I am of the opinion that this passage describes the fulfilment of the great Covenant promise of God to David and Judah 'Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever' (2 Sam 7:16).

Whilst there was a King in Jerusalem, the ancient Israelites had looked to their King for guidance and leadership from God, according to the Covenant given first to David. In later years, and after the Babylonian invasion of Judah and Jerusalem in 587BC no such king reigned, so the people longed for another king, God's 'Messiah', who would bring a new Kingdom. Now Jesus had arrived; He was sent by God and His divine calling was revealed within His teaching and His ministry. Jesus and the Father were awaiting acclamation by His people, and Peter gave that acclamation.

What was Jesus trying to do by asking His first question (16:13)?

When Jesus asked 'who do people say that the Son of Man is' (16:13), He asked a leading question for which there were many answers. In Matthew's Gospel, we find people speaking to Jesus in many ways; for example, some called Jesus the 'Son of David' (9:27; 12:23; 15:22). Jesus also called Himself the 'Son of Man' (8:20; 11:19), and He used the same term to describe Himself as the agent of God who would

announce the Kingdom (see Dan 7:13, and Matt 10:23:12:8 etc). In other places, people called Jesus 'Lord' out of respect (8:2,6,8; 9:28 etc.), and rather ironically, Herod thought that Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life (14:1,2)! Matthew himself only used the term 'Messiah' for Jesus in a couple of places within his Gospel prior to this point (1:1,17,18; 11:2); and lastly, Matthew reports that God Himself had called Jesus His 'Son' at His baptism (3:17), and in addition, the demons had agreed and said the same (8:29), as had the disciples after Jesus walked on water (14:33).

In asking the disciples His question (16:13), Jesus was putting into words the thoughts of those all around Him as they sought to understand what was happening. The first answer He received from the disciples simply reflected the same. They mentioned the possibilities they had heard had discussed; John the Baptist, Elijah, and Jeremiah (16:14). They did not want to be the first to answer Jesus and get it wrong, as they were prone to do (13:51; 15:15; 16:6,7,8).

How did Peter to make his famous statement of faith?

Jesus therefore pushed them further and asked 'Who do you say that I am yourselves?' and Peter was brave enough to be the first to speak. His leadership had already been shown (14:28; 15:15), but he had learned a great deal about faith after walking on the water and then needing Jesus' help (14:28-33) and it is likely that he had understood more than he had so far expressed. Whilst we are right to guess that Peter was acting as a spokesperson, it is unlikely that he would have said what he did unless what he said came from his own heart.

Peter's answer 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God' was a statement of his own faith and it was also said boldly on behalf of the disciples, as their leader. Jesus knew immediately that Peter had received this 'by revelation' (16:17) from the Father; it was a key moment in the salvation history of the world. Peter's faith drew together so much; he understood that Jesus was not just a messenger of God's final days, He was its bringer; He was not just a servant of God, but was part of the 'living' Godhead; He was not just a prophet, but the 'Messiah' uniquely empowered to bring God's salvation. He may not have understood how this was all going to work out, but he was the first person to make this confession by faith.

Incidentally, the phrase he used 'the Son of the living God' is virtually unique. Peter put together the expression 'Son of God' which they had already used (14:33) with the Old Testament idea that God was not made of stone or wood, but was alive in the same sense that we are alive (see Deut 5:26; Ps 42:4; 84:2). It was the classic Old Testament prophetic idea that God was to be experienced personally, and was interested in the details of our everyday lives. This was a powerful beginning for 'faith' amongst God's people.

What does Peter's blessing as 'Simon son of Jonah' mean?

In reply, Jesus gave Peter a blessing, and just as Jesus received from Peter the new title 'Son of the Living God' (16:16), Jesus gave Peter a new title; 'Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah ...' (16:17f.). It is a strange title, but a blessing once given could not be taken away (Gen 27:18-40), and it was the second time Jesus had given Peter a name. The first time was when Jesus met him and gave him the name 'Peter', meaning 'rock', and Jesus was about to explain why He had given this name to Peter (16:18 – see next section). However, we must dwell for a moment on the name 'Simon, son of Jonah'. Some think that 'Jonah' is a spelling mistake because Peter was the son of 'John' (see John 1:42), which is close in spelling to 'Jonah'. Jonah was of course the prophet who had spent three days and nights in the 'belly of the whale', and brought about the repentance of Gentiles (the city of Nineveh). Jesus had also just mentioned the prophet Jonah as a sign to the people of Israel (16:4)! By giving Peter this name He told Peter what He expected of Him.

It seems unlikely that Jesus would have made a mistake here, and Jonah was so important to Him and His ministry that Jesus named Simon after him! Also, as we have already seen, the name was given to Peter not just individually because of his faith, but because of his role as leader. The significance of the name meant that under Peter and under the faith He demonstrated, the church would be commissioned to preach to the Gentiles, as Jonah did, and witness to the saving power of God, as Jonah did. Names are always important in the Bible!

What did Jesus mean by saying He would build His church on a 'rock'?

Jesus proceeded to give further meaning to Peter's name, in a verse of scripture that is one of the most debated of the whole of scripture. This is verse 18, where Jesus explains that Peter's name, meaning 'rock' described the very basis of the church. The divisions in the church about what this means are like this; the Catholic church believes that this verse means that all authority in the church is based on Peter and his successors, meaning the Pope. Protestants object and insist that the 'rock' is 'faith', and not Peter himself, and therefore 'faith' is the basis of the church of God as the body of Christ, whatever earthly form it takes.

Churches have argued over this a long time, along with its companion verse 19 (see below). My own opinion is that the rock on which the Church is built is indeed Peter, as Jesus says. However, my conclusions about what this means differs somewhat from those made by the Catholic Church. Peter, as the leader of the disciples who embodied the faith required by God, was charged with the responsibility of bringing the Gospel to the world (28:18-20) and bringing the church to birth, just as Abraham and Sarah were the 'rock' of Israel (Isaiah 51:1,2). The letters of the New Testament make it clear that Jesus is the unique 'cornerstone' or 'foundation stone' on which the church is built (1 Cor 3:10f. Ps 118:22; Matt 21:42; 1 Peter 2:7), so we should not think of the church as built upon Peter; this would be to misinterpret Scripture as a whole. Jesus is the cornerstone, and Peter with his faith and His commission to preach the Gospel to the world is the human is the human 'rock' which is built on Jesus to make the church. What is important is Peter's function in the church rather than his particular character.

What did Jesus mean by the 'church'?

This is the first time that we find mention of 'the church' (in Greek, 'ecclesia', or 'gathering') in the New Testament. It would have been inconceivable to anyone in Jesus' day that the Messiah would come and not found a new community. The use of the word, which was rare in New Testament times is quite natural here, and would have spoken to the people for whom Matthew wrote. The important thing about what Jesus says is that he used the authority of the Godhead to call His new people 'my' church. On this foundation, even death itself (the 'gates of Hell', see Isaiah 38:10, Psalm 9:13 etc.) could not overcome the new community of the Kingdom, the Church. Evil and death and Satan would not prevail against the Church of Jesus.

What did Jesus mean by the 'keys of the Kingdom'?

Jesus also gave the 'Keys of the Kingdom' to Peter (16:19). What does this mean? We should not think of this as some form of personal authority, but a responsibility of stewardship and administering the authority of the Father. In his prophecies, Isaiah described a new 'steward of the house of Israel', and said prophetically 'I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open' (Isaiah 22:22). This stewardship is exercised today through every form of leadership within the church, but not merely in terms of authority to act in practical and organisational matters. The 'keys of the kingdom' give authority to act in spiritual matters. Jesus talked about 'loosing and 'binding' (16:19), and this was the language of forgiveness or condemnation, the most potent judgement that a leader of a church can be called to give.

The best way we can work at understanding this text is to go to John 20, where Jesus came to the disciples after His resurrection and breathed on them to receive the Holy Spirit. After this, He said these words; 'if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained' (John 20:23). In this way, John describes the giving of the same authority to the disciples to make spiritual judgements about what is right and wrong, about what is forgiven and what is condemned. If we are worried about what this means, then we should look further to the teaching of Jesus which indicates that forgiveness is what He expects, and only the 'sin against the Spirit remains unforgiven, or 'retained' (12:31,32).

Discipleship

Application

We can learn a great deal from this passage about the faith and the life of the church. It seems to me that people today still call Jesus by a number of 'names' which say more about the people who use those names than Jesus Himself. You only have to listen carefully to the language used in different churches, for example, or even the way ordinary people speak about Jesus and God, to hear the confusion and multiplicity of beliefs about Jesus and God that are 'out there' in the world. In the light of the many different things people say, personal testimony of simple faith in Jesus as our 'Christ', as Lord and Messiah and as God, is essential. By speaking out our faith within the world in whatever ways we can, we add to the witness to Christ within the world and the work of God He seeks to do.

Each word within Peter's confession of faith is worthy of our attention; 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'. As we examine this phrase, we must be led to say for ourselves what it means for Jesus to be our 'Messiah', the one who saves us and leads us to our eternal life in the presence of Almighty God. We are challenged to answer for ourselves what we think of Jesus and His relationship with God; we tend to know the 'correct' answers (to9 do with the Trinity etc.), but many Christians hold a variety of views about Jesus that are barely expressed because people do not talk about their individual faith. It is only when we open our mouths that the truth of our beliefs is exposed.

Lastly, we cannot avoid the challenge of working out what Jesus means in verse 18 and 19 of this text. I have attempted to do this myself above, but I strongly suggest that you read it several times yourself and work at this prayerfully. How we deal with these two verses has a considerable influence on how we view authority in the church, whether this is the plain authority of practical leadership, or the essential spiritual authority of those whom God appoints as His prophets and priests.

This is a text from which we can learn a great deal, but we must give it time and attention, and considerable prayer.

Questions for groups

1. Who do people say that Jesus is today? How does this measure up to what you might say Jesus is?
2. There is a connection between 'speaking out faith' and 'blessing' in this passage. In what ways may that be experienced today?
3. Does our passage describe a sufficient basic understanding of the nature of the Christian church? What does it say, and what does it not say?

Discipleship challenges

- *If asked, how do you respond to the question 'who is this Jesus'? It is worthwhile practicing your response and making sure that you can clearly express what you believe. It is surprising how many Christians feel unsure about this.*
- *Ask some other people who they think Jesus is, and write down in a booklet the responses you get. You will find this to be a revealing exercise, providing you ask a wide enough range of people!*

Final Prayer

Your love, Lord Jesus, changes everything. It removes timidity and self sufficiency in a person and makes them outgoing and bold; it takes someone who is sick and gives them special work and meaning for life; it takes a zealous youth and trains them in the humility of submission and service. We offer ourselves to You, Lord Jesus; do with us as You will; AMEN
