

## LOOKING AHEAD: SUNDAY AUGUST 27<sup>th</sup>

**Reading: Matthew 16: 13 – 20 [Twelfth (12) after Pentecost]**

Questions of identity fill this account: who Jesus is and who our faith in Jesus makes us to be (the Church). In their “[Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels](#)” scholars Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh note that we would normally anticipate that a first century answer to a question of identity would be of family or place of origin {Saul of Tarsus, Jesus of Nazareth). Instead, they write, “*since Jesus’ behaviour deviates from that expected of one of his birthplace, other means of identifying his power and status are proposed*” [above, page 112].

This all happens in the north of the country, its ‘top end’ at Caesarea of Phillip [there was another Caesarea 220 kms away on the coast (Maritime)]. Caesarea Philippi is the lush, green part of the country, resplendent with waterways and rock pools. It had in previous times before Jesus been a cultic centre, as rich, diverse environs often are. In Greek times the God Pan had been worshipped at its waterfall and cave. Roman rulers came to enjoy its luxury and scenery. Eugene M Boring says in the New Interpreters Commentary series that this may be deliberate by the writer of Matthew: “He brings the scene of Jesus’ confession as the Jewish Messiah into the shadow of a Caesar temple, where the Roman destroyers of Jerusalem had celebrated their victory” [[Matthew](#), page 343].

Caesarea was therefore an appropriate setting for a bold declaration of faith in the midst of its many offerings. The affirmation of Jesus, his identity and role is made in response to a question: “*Who do you say the Son of Man is?*” This is confessional language, stating what we know, rather than a new revelation for the disciples. In Matthew’s Gospel they have already established Jesus as “Son of God” in chapter 14 (verse 33).

It is Peter who speaks rightly. More than the greatest of prophets, including the ones who transcended death and share a place in the transfiguration of Jesus, Peter knows that Jesus is ‘*the Messiah, Son of the living God*’. This is the faith that Matthew’s Gospel has been striving towards in previous encounters on the Sea of Galilee and with the woman in foreign Syro-Phoenicia.

Then in the next four (4) verses (17 – 20) Peter is commended and seemingly made ‘special’ for his answer in verses which have been the source of tensions in church history ever since. These words are likely a later Church tradition that developed around leadership and function now supplied ‘back’ into the Gospel encounter. However, even so, note their clear point: Eugene M Boring (above) puts it well when he says, “*Peter is not blessed because of a personal attainment or insight he has achieved. Knowledge of Jesus’ saving role comes by divine revelation- as gift, not attainment. In this, Peter is representative of Christian faith generally*”. [[Commentary on Matthew](#), page 344-345]. Remember, too, this same Peter is about to get it all wrong again in his next utterance (denial of Jesus’ suffering – next week’s reading).

Boring (above) identifies a “*Matthean pattern of revelation, blessing, name giving and commissioning ... already applied to all the disciples in 5: 3 – 16*” [[Matthew](#), page 347]. Jesus then gives the former Simon a new nick-name, Cephas, or ‘Rock’. And it is a name that stuck and has been given to generations of sons of Christian families ever since as Peter.

Then comes the promise that on ‘rock’ like this, Jesus will build his church. This is only one of two (2) references to ‘church’ in the Gospels and may hint at later insertion. Matthew’s theology, as Boring (above) notes, is of “*the continuing active presence of Christ in the church.*” Jesus makes it living. The ‘rocks and stones’ of what he builds are people! *Ekklesia* literally means ‘called out’.

In this church he is building, Jesus gives Peter three (3) symbolic roles: that on which the church is built, the holder of the keys, and the one who binds and looses. But Jesus wasn't giving Peter permission to become the type of person who maintains control, what we today call a 'gate-keeper'. It is to be noted that keys belonged to the teaching role and binding to holding of authority in rabbinic interpretation. By inference, we all share in the tasks handed in this dialogue to Peter.

The point is that all this is dependent upon the action of God, seen in the pattern described by Eugene Boring above. In his Memoirs simply titled, "The Pastor" Eugene Peterson, author of "The Message" (a translation of the Bible) says, "*The moment Jesus ascends into heaven, as told in Acts, the story shifts to the church*" [page 116]. Perhaps here in the account of Matthew we have that Gospel's transition point to 'the church'. But as Peterson warns, "*It is common at this point to let Jesus slip into the background and to proceed to understand the story of the church as what we are doing for God ... now it is up to us: we take responsibility for the church*" [page 116 – 117]. This, Peterson calls, "*The American stereotype of church ... Church is our business. God retires to the sidelines and we take over*" [page 117]. This can be what happens in practice.

But this section of Matthew's Gospel would affirm that it is not possible. To quote the Commentary noted above, "*God is the one who through Christ grants the revelation that generates faith, the one who blesses those who receive the revelation, the one who gives us a new name (identity, nature, not just label), and send us to continue his work, including authority to make decisions in his name.*" [page 347] Ours is the privilege to be given the trust to share what God does in the world.

THEMES: God's action in revelation and calling, building Church, ministry,