

Matthew 16: 13-20: A Question of Identity

The question of identity is at the heart of today's Gospel: specifically, who is Jesus? As Jesus and the twelve disciples stand at the site of multiple pagan shrines in the town of Caesarea Philippi, he asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples are careful. They report what they have heard, that Jesus is a reincarnation of John the Baptizer, or Eilijah, or another long-ago prophet. They are factual, avoiding any personal opinions. Then Jesus asks them the "for the money" question: "But who do **you** say that I am?" Simon Peter, the rash, the bold disciple, answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." He risks laughter, scorn, and even an accusation of blasphemy with his answer. But Jesus tells him "yes." God Himself has revealed the answer to Peter, and with this answer, Jesus tells Simon Peter that from this point on he has a new identity. He is now Peter – in Greek, the rock. And he will be the rock on which Jesus will found a church which will withstand even the gates of Hades.

That confession is even more impactful because of where they are standing. Caesarea Philippi was the site of what many non-Jews believed was an actual, physical gateway to Hades—the realm of death, where all people, both good and bad, go when they die. Standing at this very gate of Hades, when Jesus proclaims that not even the gates of Hades will prevail against his church, he is proclaiming more than comfort. He is announcing victory – victory over death. He is assuring us that not even death can destroy what God is building in Christ.

Jesus asks us the same question: "Who do you say that I am?" We answer it again and again throughout our lives. He is our savior, our comforter, our Lord, the one we wrestle with in grief and the one who holds us in hope. Above all, he is the Son of God, whose death and resurrection have forever changed the meaning of death.

Because of him, our deepest identity is secure: we are beloved, forgiven children of God. Like Peter, we will not always get it right. We may be bold one day and afraid the next. But our failures do not undo Christ's promise. Nothing—not even death—can separate us from the love of God. On that promise, we rest secure. Thanks be to God. Amen.