



Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church August 24, 2014

Matthew 16: 13-20

A man dies and finds himself at the gates of Heaven, and there is St Peter to greet him, let him in and introduce him to the new kingdom. Peter shows him around and says, "Here is your chance to catch up with all the people you have missed, the Baptists are on that cloud over there, the Uniting Church are over there, the Lutherans are over the back there, I'm sure you'll find your way around". The man replies, "Thank you, I'm sure I'll feel right at home. By the way, what's that big wall over there all about?" And Peter says, "Oh, that's the Catholics over there, but keep the noise down, they think they're the only ones up here."

I tell that joke, and it can be applied to any denomination, for two reasons. In almost every cartoon or joke about heaven, we are presented with the image of Peter at the gates of heaven; a direct cultural translation of today's Gospel reading in which Peter is given the keys of the kingdom. But also, there's the tradition of Peter as the first bishop of Rome, the person whose leadership and faith builds the church. These two ideas seem to point to this passage from Matthew being about Peter and the church. Simon gets the name Peter - the rock - and he is the rock on which the church is built. BUT. This passage isn't about Peter, it's about Jesus and his identity. Indeed this whole section of Matthew's Gospel, from chapter 14 through to chapter 17, is all about the identity of Jesus – "who do people say that I am?"

The rock on which the church is to be built is not Peter the person, it is *petra*, the confession that he makes. "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God".

Chapter 13 of Matthew ends with Jesus being rejected at Nazareth because the people couldn't see Joseph and Mary's son being a prophet. Chapter 14 opens with Herod thinking that Jesus is John the Baptist back from the dead. Then there is a seeming cascade of stories that all have the identity of Jesus as the subtext – feeding the thousands, walking on water, interpreting scripture, healing – and then this story where the identity rises from subtext to object. "Who do people say that I am?" And then, even after this story, the section continues with the Transfiguration and the ongoing spelling out of the death and resurrection to come. You can see the importance of this section in Matthew's telling of the Gospel by looking at the picture of Jesus before it, and the picture

of Jesus after it. Up to chapter 13 Jesus is the prophet, doing the work of healing and teaching and calling people to God; after chapter 17 Jesus is the Lord, with people asking things of him and standing in awe of his teaching and miracle working. This questioning of the disciples about identity is vital for the disciples as the narrative starts to head towards Jerusalem and death. And, despite the Lectionary splitting it in two, the picture of the upcoming death and resurrection is just as much a part of this because, however important Peter's confession is, he only has a partial picture. His idea of Christ, the Son of the Living God, does not include death and resurrection.

However, despite that background, it's easy to get distracted by the pun about rocks, and the only mention in the Gospels of the church. Even amongst the leaders of the second century there were differing opinions about the interpretation of this passage. Is it about Peter or does Peter stand for all disciples who make the confession? And the book of Acts doesn't help, because instead of supporting one reading or the other, each reading of this encounter between Jesus and the disciples can become a lens through which you can interpret Acts. If you think Peter is being promoted to prime disciple – the Rock – then the first 10 chapters of Acts would seem to confirm that. Peter is the one who stands up at Pentecost, who heals the cripple man at the Temple and who gets the great vision of the inclusive church. If however you read Jesus words as a general blessing on all who confess him as Christ, then that stands out as the theme of Acts. Phillip doesn't take the Ethiopian to meet Peter, the confession of Jesus is the key to that story; Steven doesn't cry out to Peter, it is the confession of Jesus as Lord that gets him stoned. And, of course, later in Acts Peter disappears from the story; James heads the church in Jerusalem and Paul is the one building the church through preaching Jesus as the Christ. I favour the latter, not because of any denominational bias, but because it is Peter himself, in his epistle, who calls Jesus the cornerstone for the church and each of us are living stones being built into a spiritual house. And also, given the Old Testament background of God as the Rock, it would be unusual for any Jewish writer to apply that metaphor to a person. Rather than Peter as the rock, we all become peters and the petras through confessing Jesus as the Christ

“Who do you say that I am?” This is not just a question to the disciples or even the readers in Matthew's community. This is the question to all as the basis of faith. And, the way this story is told and placed in the narrative, if we don't have a full understanding of what that means. Peter's answer was praised as the rock on which the church would be built even though it was not a full understanding. His experience led him to see Jesus as someone more than a teacher. More than another prophet in the line of Elijah, or John. However, as Peter stands as representative of every disciple, there is, in this story, permission to approach and confess in faith without the need for a degree in theology. What is there about this Son of Man that would lead you to confess that he is the Son of

God? What, indeed, do you understand as the Son of God? These stories of identity are separated from the stories of teaching and interpreting the Law, he is more than a teacher or wise man. Matthew, and Mark, from whom he received these stories, want you to see the one who can feed the thousands, calm and conquer the storms, bring life and reach and minister beyond the boundaries of nation and tradition. Questions of divinity arise, but so do to questions of what it means to be truly human in relationship with God. But all those questions don't need to be answered before you can become a part of the church. The building of the church is based on the simple, faith based answer to the question, "Who do you say Jesus is?" An answer that sees something special, life affirming and God engaging, but allows for the ongoing wrestle with mystery. "You are the promised one, in unique and welcoming relationship with the present, engaging God who is more than a metaphysical concept." The Christ, the Son of the Living God.