

Identity: Matthew 16:13-20  
Reflection for Baltimore Carmel *Lectio Divina* August 22, 2020

Who do people say that you are? It depends on who you ask. What if you asked, not someone in your family or your community, but someone not at all like you? Who do those people say that you are? Identity is the lens through which we'll view today's text about which British scholar J.C. Fenton wrote "Not many verses in the NT can have been more discussed than those which make up this paragraph..." (*Saint Matthew Pelican NT commentary*, Penguin, 1963/1987, p. 264)

A great joy of current biblical scholarship is its ecumenicity. We sit at the same table with the same book and are all fed, as Isaiah says, with "a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines." (25:6) Our text is one of the few for which interpretation divides along confessional/sectarian lines. But, be of good cheer, I'm going to ignore that and examine the universal, pervasive, and personal subject of these verses: identity.

### The Textual Notes

The obtuseness of the disciples frames Mt. 16:13-20. The last story in chapter 15 is the feeding of the 4,000 which the first story in chapter 16 explains. When the disciples forgot to bring lunch, Jesus responds "You of little faith [one of the Matthean Jesus' favorite criticisms] why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive?" (16:8-9) Well, no. They don't. So when they get to Caesarea Philippi (25 miles N. of the Sea of Galilee, and ruled over by Philip the Tetrarch, so out of Herod's clutches) Jesus exhibits continuing concern about the disciples' lack of understanding, and asks the \$50 question "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" More on that momentarily. The closing of the frame is the exchange between Jesus and Peter in 16:21-28 in which Peter makes clear he doesn't understand what "Messiah" means. "Peter's Confession" is framed by imperfect understanding of Jesus' identity.

Peter's confession is the turning point in the synoptic gospels. Following Mark, Matthew and Luke place it near the spacial center of their narratives. It is THE key Christological scene as official opposition to Jesus mounts, and he and his followers are soon to begin the journey to Jerusalem. Jesus needs to know what his disciples understand about him. Perhaps he is also continuing to work out his own self-understanding and identity.

Our text exhibits two parts: in vv. 13-16 Jesus raises a question about the popular understanding of his identity to which the disciples and Peter respond. In vv. 17-19 Jesus illuminates Peter's identity, Peter who represents the disciples in Matthew. The over-all pattern is: question, general response/ question specific response/ clarification. The text closes with the "stern order," "Don't tell anyone." Why establish a fact and then forbid its proclamation? Stay tuned.

#### *vv. 13-16*

In the relative safety of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples two questions: first, what popular opinion about his him is; second, who THEY think he is. The word on the street is that Jesus is John the Baptist (popular and martyred for speaking harsh truths to those in

authority), or Elijah (popularly understood to precede the Messiah's coming), or Jeremiah, or another of the prophets. Popular opinion was that Jesus spoke for God. Prophet, *pro phemi* in Greek doesn't mean "predictor of the future," but one who speaks for. So far so good, but not good enough for someone who preached perfection in the Sermon on the Mount.

So Jesus asks the disciples "who do YOU say that I am?" The "you" is emphatic. This cuts to the core of the disciples' relationship to Jesus and moves the Q & A session to a very different level. Peter blurts out the right words, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." If it weren't for 16: 21-23 this would be perfect. But when Jesus explains his Messiahship means his suffering Peter says, in effect, "no way."

vv. 17-19

Part one of our text is focused around the identity of Jesus. Part two focuses on the identity of Peter. These verses are "peculiar" to Matthew; they occur only in this gospel, are deeply Semitic in character, and reflect Mt's lexical field, focus on Peter, and interest in the church, *ekklesia*, a term used only here and in Mt. 18:17 in the NT.

What Jesus says about Peter is the *crux interpretum* for scholarship. Notice Jesus, Himself, says that Peter's confession is the result of Divine Revelation, that is, not Peter's own "smarts" which aren't evident in the gospels: "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." (v. 17) *With* his deficiencies, Peter is singled out for Divine Revelation. One remembers that earlier in the gospel, Jesus thanked God, "because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." He continues, "no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." (11:25, 27)

Omitting interpretations of "rocks" and "keys" and "binding and loosing" which are influenced by ecclesial structures not extant at the time of Matthew, remember that Isaiah 28:15-18 asserts that God builds on *tested* cornerstones and that Jesus closed the Sermon on the Mount with a parable about a wise man who built his house on a rock. Like biblical Israel, Peter's identity is that of the one, in spite of his short comings, who is mysteriously chosen to receive divine revelation and to become foundational. The point is one I heard in a sermon years ago: if you are willing, God will make you able. Peter loved Jesus and was willing for the sake of that love. God made him able for the task ahead. As the subsequent text makes clear, Peter can't fully bear witness (the verb for witness is *martureo*, from whence the English word "martyr") to Jesus as Messiah without sharing his suffering.

v.20

Jesus confirms the correctness of the response "You are the Messiah" with what he, even if the disciples did not, understood it. The command "do not tell," may be because, as the next story makes clear, the disciples don't yet understand the implications of the correct answer. "Messiah" must be understood in light of Jesus' cross and resurrection. If disciples go around blabbing about "Messiah," they may precipitate trouble and cut short the time Jesus needs to instruct them. Verse 21 reads "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering...and be killed, and on the third day be raised." One cannot fully confess Jesus as Messiah without being implicated in his suffering and death.

## Application

Scripture is often the best commentary on scripture. Behind my reading of today's text stands what St. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: "All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord . . . , are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another;[ for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.]" (2 Cor 3:18) AMAZING! Our transformation begins, not with theological abstraction, but with knowing the Lord's identity.

Today's gospel teaches us about identity, about who Jesus is and who, by confessing him as Messiah, Peter will become. Peter represents every believer who confesses Jesus. A disciple's identity is profoundly connected to the identity of the Lord. As Fr. Jerry Murphy-O'Connor wrote in another context, "...that continuity may be accompanied by radical change." (*I Corinthians*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1979/1991, 147). Dom Michael Casey OCSO suggests, "we exist in a lifelong process of growing toward that which we are to become." (*Balaam's Ass*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019, 278), and 1 John 3:2 promises, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed we will be like him, for we will see him as he is."

Seeing Jesus as he is is the why of the questions in our text. Not surprisingly, the Transfiguration follows soon after Peter's confession. Peter, James, and John glimpse Jesus as he is in the fullness of his identity. For Peter, and for us, identity begins with knowing who Jesus is. To know him, as Sr. Mary Ann reminded us 2 weeks ago, we "Turn our eyes upon Jesus": transfigured on the mountain and crucified on the cross. To confess Jesus as Messiah and Son of God is to be implicated in why he suffered and was crucified. "And sooner or later," writes Thomas Merton, "if we follow Christ we have to risk everything in order to gain everything." (*Thoughts in Solitude*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1956/ 77, p. 34)

So our "big identity question" is "Who am I in light of who Jesus is?" Start with "beloved"...and see where that leads you.

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