

What's In A Name?
A sermon by David Roquemore
First Presbyterian Church, Newton NC
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Matthew 16: 13-20

Who Is Jesus?

That's the perennial question! Who is this guy?

Peter answers him, in our text today. You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Let's look at the names Jesus is called in this story.

Who do you say I am? Well, Jesus, some say you are John the Baptist and some say Elijah. Still others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets.

All of these are historical characters that figure prominently in Jewish thinking of Jesus' day. When thinking about the promised coming of the Messiah, they often thought there would be someone who would come first, to prepare the way.

John the Baptist was one choice. Why would they think this? John was a popular teacher, who had many disciples and followers. The people paid attention to John, even if they disagreed with him. He was like many of the prophets. So he may have come back from dead; that is who Jesus might be.

Or Elijah. It was said that before the Messiah came, Elijah would return. If you were paying attention, you'd think that John the Baptizer was Elijah, preparing the way for Jesus. But if you weren't up on all the details, you might think this Jesus you kept hearing about was Elijah returned from the dead.

Or Jeremiah, who was also an outcast sort of prophet. He had a singular sort of life and his reputation lended itself easily to this kind of thing. Perhaps he has come back to prepare the way for the Messiah.

All of these confusions could have easily existed side by side in ancient Israel. Remember, they didn't have the advantage of having all the news available all the time; they didn't have Google. All they knew was what someone told them, what someone had heard from someone else. Information might be hard to come by.

Then Jesus asks Peter the hard question: who do you say that I am? It doesn't matter what the public thinks, but you are with me all the time. What do you think? Peter blurts out, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!" I say blurts because I don't think he thought about it. It just came out of his mouth — you know how that sometimes happens, for good or ill? This time it was for the good.

Jesus is the Christ. Christ is the Greek word for the Hebrew *mashiach*, or Messiah. This is the Anointed One, the one who was promised to come and rescue Israel from its enemies and provide salvation. The word reflects the disciples' understanding of who Jesus was and what he was about. Jesus never uses this word about himself; one commentary says perhaps he was wary of the nationalistic interpretation given to the Messiah. The word rapidly becomes mostly a name: Jesus Christ is the way that Paul refers to Jesus in his letters. We can be forgiven for thinking it is his last name.

Jesus is the Son. We have perhaps muddied the waters a little bit with several centuries of speculation about the Trinity, and more centuries of adding to that doctrine. There are those who say that the Church created this doctrine, or who say that the Roman Catholic Church created it and it is heresy. No, it is there in the Bible, but needed to be fleshed out somewhat.

Jesus most often refers to himself as the Son of Man. This is a Hebrew expression, and in Ezekiel you can find it frequently. There it is used as a substitute for "human being." A verse there might say, "O Son of Man, do you see..." It simply means, "Human, or man, do you see this or that?" Son of Man becomes a Messianic title, mostly through Jesus using it, and so indicates that he is the Messiah.

He is the Son of Man, and also the Son of God. He is divine and human at the same time, and without getting too theological, we can see that he stands as the intersection of the divine and human, being both at once. To say Jesus is the Son of God implies that God is his father; to say he is Son implies that he has a Father, and to say God is Father, implies the Son. Wolfhart Pannenberg notes that we call God "Father" and Jesus "Son" because Jesus himself referred to God as Father in very intimate ways.

Jesus is the Son of God. That is a messianic title as well — to say a person is the Son of God elevates them. It indicates special status, a different kind of being. We sometimes use the phrase, "child of God" or "children of God," to indicate that a person or group of people are beloved of God, but that doesn't really carry any grand significance, the way that "son of God" does.

Jesus is said to be the "Son of the Living God," as opposed to some idol or dead statue. The Bible is clear that idols are just human-creations, just statues that someone carved out of wood or stone. They aren't real, they don't have power. They can't *do* anything to help you in life or hinder you. But the Living God — he is a different story. That phrase is used now and then to refer to God's power and ability. He is the God who is alive!

You remember the television show, *Designing Women*? I never watched it much, but I do remember one episode, when Dixie Carter is chewing someone out on the phone, and before she hangs up she says, "And crystals are just rocks!" That was in the early 90s, when all sorts of magical powers were ascribed to crystals. They are just rocks! And idols are just pieces of wood.

So Peter's Confession as we call it describes Jesus as Messiah, Son of God, the Son of the Holy One of Israel, the Living God. Jesus applauds this and says, the Father has given

these words to you. Then comes something a bit mysterious. Jesus says, “you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” It helps if you know that Peter is a nickname, something like “Rocky,” so the phrase is “You are Rocky, and on this rock I will build my church.” The Roman Catholics look back to Peter as the first bishop of Rome and so (in an intriguing bit of anachronism) as the first Pope. They take this to mean that Jesus endorsed Peter in this way, and so all authority is given to him.

The Reformers differed, and suggested that Jesus was applauding Peter’s faith, so that it is specifically not his person that Jesus commends. Thus the Reformers could ignore the claims of the Catholics about Peter’s authority, and that of subsequent occupants of the Throne of St. Peter.

What about us, here, today? What does this mean? Well, Jesus goes on to say that he is going to be crucified by the authorities in Jerusalem, and Peter objects. This time, Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan,” and goes on to call for all of us to obey him, to follow him, even to the cross, if need be.

So I think we are called to make the same sort of confession, to follow the lead of and share the faith of Peter. Jesus is for us the Christ, the Son of the Living God, with all that means for our lives. Let us take Jesus’ teachings to heart, and learn to be loving and giving, to give in fact our very lives for others in his name.

By whatever name we call him, however we think of him, Jesus is our savior and Lord. He is the one who shows us what true love is, even to death. No one can love more than that — unless they come back from the dead! And he did that too!

Thanks be to God! Amen.