

# *A New Sanctuary . . . A Sure Foundation*

Fourth Sunday of Easter

May 11, 2003

Sermon Background Study

*Scripture Passage – Matthew 16:13-18*

<sup>13</sup>Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” <sup>14</sup>And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” <sup>15</sup>He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” <sup>16</sup>Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” <sup>17</sup>And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup>And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

*As we move into our new sanctuary, it is an appropriate time for us to remember Jesus’ promise to build a church, a community of God’s people, which will endure . . . even against the forces of death.*

*Setting the stage for Peter’s confession<sup>1</sup> and Jesus’ promise*

Today’s scripture passage is the central scene in an extended narrative in Matthew’s Gospel (13:53–17:27). Amidst significant opposition from those who are blind to his mission, Jesus works to form a new community of God’s people. This community will be comprised of those who respond to the Good News and embrace Jesus’ new way of being the people of God.<sup>2</sup>

After confronting Pharisees and Sadducees who had come to test him, Jesus, with his disciples, retreated to the region of Caesaria Philippi, about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. There, Jesus asks the disciples who people think he is. Clearly, the populace has a very high opinion of Jesus. Some think he is John the Baptist, who had announced the coming of the Messiah. Others think Jesus is Elijah, the great prophet of Israel (1 Kings 17–2 Kings 2). Elijah had not died, but had ascended to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:9-12) and was expected to return to usher in God’s kingdom (Malachi 4:5). Still others among the Galileans think Jesus is Jeremiah, another of Israel’s great prophets, who had pronounced judgment on Israel and Solomon’s Temple at the time of the temple’s destruction in 587BC. Though the people held Jesus in high esteem, they did not see Jesus as the Anointed One, God’s Messiah ~ the returning king who would usher in the kingdom of God.

## The Son of Man

In v. 13 of today’s passage, Jesus refers to himself as the “Son of Man.” Of the many titles of Jesus in the New Testament, the “Son of Man” is undoubtedly the most puzzling to many Christians. Yet, in the Gospels, Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man nearly thirty times. Indeed, he is the only person in the NT who uses the title!

Though in Hebrew the phrase “son of man” is simply used to mean “human being,” it becomes a loaded phrase in the strange, apocalyptic language of the Book of Daniel. In Daniel 7, God’s faithful people have been tormented by their enemies (the beasts), but when the “Ancient of Days” takes his judgment seat, the ‘saints/son of man’ are vindicated and their enemies are destroyed (v. 13, 18, 22, 27). In this passage, the Son of Man has represented the suffering of God’s people at the hands of oppressors.

To Jews living under Roman oppression in the first century, Jesus’ use of “Son of Man” would have been understood by many to be a veiled claim of messiahship. For example, at Jesus’ trial, Caiaphas, the High Priest, asked Jesus point-blank – “are you the Messiah?” Jesus responded by quoting Daniel 7:13, referring to himself as the Son of Man, and invoking the implicit messianic claim. This wasn’t lost on Caiaphas, who tore his cloak while screaming “He has blasphemed.”

<sup>1</sup>In the Christian vocabulary, “confess” has two important meanings. First, it can mean to admit one’s sins, to ‘fess up’ to our failings. Second, it can mean to state what one believes. Thus, the great creeds of our faith are sometimes called “confessions” – they state the truths we proclaim to the world. In today’s passage, Peter confesses his belief that Jesus is the Messiah.

<sup>2</sup>Two commentaries on Matthew underlie much of this study: Eugene Boring’s commentary in the *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Abingdon Press, 1995 and D.A. Hagner’s commentary in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, Word, 2002.

## Peter's confession

Though the populace does not yet grasp Jesus' true identity, in Matthew's Gospel at least<sup>3</sup>, the disciples are beginning to see. Some time earlier, the disciples had seen Jesus walk on water in the midst of a storm, provoking them to worship Jesus and say, "Truly you are the Son of God" (Matthew 14:22-36). But now, in a peaceful setting, Jesus asks his disciples directly "Who do you say that I am?" Perhaps speaking for them all or perhaps speaking only for himself, Simon Peter states his belief ~ his confession ~ that Jesus is the Messiah, the very Son of the Living God.<sup>4</sup> Jesus responds by blessing Simon, proclaiming that his confession, his understanding that Jesus is the Messiah, is the work of God, who has revealed this to Simon. But . . . has God revealed everything about Jesus and his vocation to Simon? Evidently not; for not long after this, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must suffer. Peter didn't understand this, or didn't what to. Jesus rebuked Simon Peter for being a "stumbling block," even calling him "Satan" (Matthew 16:21-23).

## Jesus' promise

After blessing Simon, Jesus tells him, "you are Peter<sup>5</sup>, and on this rock, I will build my church . . ." This verse has proved to be one of the most controversial in the NT. Does Jesus mean that Peter himself is the

### Simon Peter

The disciple we know as Simon Peter was born just Simon (actually, Simeon in Hebrew), the son of a man named Jonah. We know little from the Bible about Simon's life before he met Jesus. We know that he and his brother, Andrew, worked as fishermen in the Sea of Galilee. Simon lived in Capernaum and spoke with a Galilean accent. He was married and his wife's mother lived with them. In the Gospels, Simon Peter is seen as the central figure among the disciples. Nonetheless, it is Simon Peter who would three times deny even knowing Jesus after Jesus' arrest. After Pentecost, Peter led the church in Jerusalem. He carried the Good News throughout Judea and brought the first uncircumcised Gentile to faith in Christ, a Roman centurion named Cornelius (Acts 10).

"Peter" was actually a nickname given Simon by Jesus. The nickname meant "rock," which was *Cephas* in Aramaic<sup>1</sup>, *Petros* in Greek, and *Peter* in English. At the time, Peter was not used as a proper name in Palestine.

1. The everyday language of Jesus and his disciples.

rock on whom the church will be built? Or does "this" refer to Peter's confession, his belief that Jesus is the Messiah? Because the Roman Catholic Church has always used this verse to support the papacy, Protestants have tended to prefer the latter understanding. Perhaps a better approach is to understand that it is the *confessing Peter* on whom Jesus will build his church. Certainly, in the Gospels, Peter played the primary role among the disciples. In addition, he was the early leader of the Christian community in Jerusalem and Judea. On the day of Pentecost, it was Peter who rose to deliver the first great speech of the young church (Acts 2). But Jesus has more in mind than just Peter the man. It is the believing Peter around whom Jesus will form his new community, his church (*ekklesia* in the Greek). This imagery of foundations and churches is used by many of the NT writers. Paul reminds us that it is Jesus Christ who is the foundation (1 Cor 3:11). For the writer of Ephesians, Jesus is the cornerstone of God's household which is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (2:20).

We needn't be troubled by these varied metaphors. Jesus is Lord and all things must point to him. His church is comprised of people who confess that Jesus is Lord and Messiah, who carry on God's work of renewing and restoring all humanity and creation. Jesus promised Peter and the other disciples that even the "gates of Hades" would not prevail against his church. Hades is the place of the dead, not a place of punishment - these are the "gates of death" (Isaiah 38:10; Job 38:17). Death, having come through sin (Gen. 3:3), symbolizes the powers of evil. Jesus promises that even though we battle evil every day and in many forms, his church will endure and will never be conquered. These are words of great comfort and profound encouragement. As we move into our new sanctuary, inviting more and more people into relationship with Jesus and one another, we know that our work will never be in vain. The church, God's community, will endure and will prevail.

<sup>3</sup> In Mark's Gospel, Peter's confession is the first acknowledgement of Jesus' true identity.

<sup>4</sup> Peter's confession that Jesus is the "Son of the Living God" is not an affirmation of Jesus' divinity, but an affirmation of Jesus' royalty. To a first-century Jew, the Messiah was a kingly figure, but not a divine one.

<sup>5</sup> This is a word play. See the text box above.

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Daniel 7:1-21 The beasts are the enemies of Israel; God, the 'ancient of days' vindicates God's people and destroys their enemies</p>	<p>Day 2 Mark 8:27-9:1 Mark's telling of Peter's confession; Jesus' teaching on the cost of discipleship</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 22:52-62 Peter denies Jesus three times</p>	<p>Day 4 Acts 2:14-36 Peter's speech on Pentecost</p>
<p>Day 5 Acts 10:1-11:18 Peter converts Cornelius and must defend himself in Jerusalem.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

## Sermon Notes

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### *St. Andrew Center for Christian Learning*

We at St. Andrew are committed to inviting people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another through worshiping, learning, loving, and serving. Our Center for Christian Learning is devoted to helping people grow to be better disciples of Jesus Christ through learning. The Center's Bible Academy offers 8-wk classes in the fall, winter, and spring. We will also offer the St. Andrew Summer Lecture Series again this year. The Center is a new and growing ministry at St. Andrew. More information on the Center's activities can be found at [www.standrewccl.org](http://www.standrewccl.org).

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Moving into our new sanctuary and the other buildings marks an obvious milestone in the history of St. Andrew. It is an occasion of great joy, representing God's grace and the diligent work of so many. As we mark this day, discuss where you think St. Andrew ought to head. How might we use these incredible facilities to further God's kingdom? Even more importantly, in what directions might we turn the rich talents and blessings of our congregation? In what new ways will we be able to serve our community and the body of Christ? How best can we truly be Jesus' church?
2. In his commentary on Matthew, D. A. Hare writes, "In his strengths and weaknesses he [Peter] represents ordinary Christians who strive, yet often fail, to be loyal followers of Jesus. Even in this passage which so strongly emphasizes his uniqueness he represents later believers who are called upon to make the same confession. And in the sequel [when Jesus rebukes Peter], which dramatically portrays the limitations of his confession, he likewise represents ordinary believers who affirm their faith in Jesus but cannot quite understand why the cross was necessary." All Christians struggle. We all wrestle with our faith and our commitment to Jesus. What can we learn from Peter's own struggles to be a true disciple of Jesus? Americans tend to be pretty pragmatic, action-oriented people. Why do you think that Jesus placed so much emphasis on Peter's beliefs? How might beliefs shape actions?