



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 15th January 2006
by Mark Ashton

10p

Matthew chapter 16:13-28

The Soul-Saver

1) Identifying God's Son

(vv 13-18)

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (vv 13-14). And, you know, exactly that same debate has been going on over all the 20 centuries, since Jesus put that question to His disciples on the road to Caesarea Philippi. Oh, the answers have varied—someone has suggested that a 20th century version of that conversation might have sounded like this—'Jesus said to His disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they said to Him, "Some say, the ontological proclamation of the eternal kerygma. Others say, the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being". And Jesus said to them, "Whaaaaat?!"'

It was a debate Jesus intended to provoke. Last week we saw how He warned earlier in the chapter against any religious teaching that might prevent us from seeing Who He is. Now He prompted the disciples to put their own faith on the line: *"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"* (v 15). The answers that people were giving in Jesus' own lifetime—*John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets* (v 14) were neither unflattering nor unreasonable. But Peter realised that merely human categories were not enough: *Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"* (v 16). And Jesus' response to Peter's answer marks it out as a key moment in the gospel story: *Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven* (v 17). Notice Jesus did not say, "Well done, Peter, you've got it. The denarius has dropped at last!" No, Peter's recognition of Jesus was not a human achievement (*not revealed to you by man*); it was an act of gracious, divine revelation (*but by my Father in heaven*). We only get to see Who Jesus is by God's revelation. But that act of recognition by divine grace is the most important single thing that can ever happen to anyone of us during our life on earth. Has God opened your eyes to Who Jesus is? If you are in doubt about that, stay with me, please. See how Jesus went on—

"And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (vv 18-19). Those 2 verses need to be understood in the light of the next four verses: *Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men"* (vv 20-23). Well, here's a real puzzle: at one moment Peter is the rock on which Jesus will build His church (v 18), and within 5 verses he is Satan (v 23) and has become a very different sort of stone, a stumbling block to Jesus, which might cause Jesus to fall. What explains the switch? Well, look at what Peter has just said in each case: in verse 16 he has a gospel confession on his lips: *Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* But in verse 22 Peter has a gospel denial on his lips: ? Jesus spoke of the cross and the resurrection and: *Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!"* (vv 22-23a).

It was not Peter per se, who provided the foundation for the church. It was the gospel, the good news about God's Son, which Peter had just proclaimed. The early church did not formulate the gospel: The gospel formed the early church. And that leads us to our second heading:

2) Understanding God's Methods

(vv 18-23)

“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (v 18). Note, that is an offensive rather than a defensive image. Hades is not going to attack the Church. The Church (the gospel community) is going to attack Hades (the kingdom of the dead). And Hades will not prove stronger (note the more helpful translation at the foot of the page). Its gates will not be able to prevent the gospel message liberating men and women freeing them from death to life. And the gospel proclamation of the Church (that is you and I telling our friends about Jesus) brings the timeless truths of heaven down and declares them to humanity on earth. That's what verse 19 is about: ***“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”*** Notice again the more literal and more helpful translation at the foot of the page in the NIV (the periphrastic future perfect!) ***will have been bound in heaven...Heaven is outside time. There is no future or past there. But the gospel declares the timeless truths of heaven on earth, so that we can invite people to enter eternity, by telling them about Jesus. Some that will release and some alas! that will bind. What an awesome responsibility! But God does it by the gospel (the message about Jesus)—and the gospel is about the cross—look at verse 20:***

Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ (v 20). They needed first to understand more about the nature of what the Christ had come to do. So: ***From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life*** (v 21). How did Jesus show them that this had to happen? It must have been from the Old Testament scriptures. How else could He have established its necessity?

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” (vv 22,23a). Peter used very strong language and it provoked a very sharp rebuke. He had just confessed Jesus as the Christ, but then Peter spoke as if he knew God's will better than the Messiah Himself knew it. Peter's strong will and his warm heart, linked to his ignorance of God's word, produced a shocking bit of arrogance. Devotion to God must always be controlled by revelation from God. Don't let's think we are loving God, if we are not reading His word to us (and taking seriously the bits of it we find hard).

Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men” (v 23). Notice how that is the opposite of what Jesus had said to Peter in verse 17: ***Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.”*** So verse 17 did not represent an irreversible breakthrough in Peter's spiritual development. At one moment he was thinking God's way about Jesus. At the next moment he was thinking in his own, human, way about Jesus. And you and I keep going that too. There will have been things today in our lives, to do with the Lordship of Jesus over us, that we will have seen in God's way, from a divine perspective; and I fear there will have been a great many others that we have seen in a purely human way, where we have been entirely human in our attitudes and thoughts. And we slip so easily from one to the other. It is like one of those 3D pictures. I struggle to get them to work for me, and, when I do eventually spot the real picture behind the pattern, I lose it again so easily. We're like that.

But this is not just a perspective, a mode of regard, a way of looking for the believer. It is a way of life for the believer.

3) Conforming to God's Pattern

(vv 24-26)

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” (vv 24-26).

Jesus did not just die to save us. The manner of His death has set us a pattern, a way to live on this earth: ***Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and***

follow me (v 24). Familiarity has softened the impact of this saying for us. We apply it to a daily burden of suffering: “That’s the cross he/she has to bear”, we might say of someone’s arthritis. But they would not have used the expression in that way in the 1st century. If this was the 1st century, and you or I saw a friend of our’s tomorrow morning walking through the market square, with a cross on his shoulder and a squad of Roman soldiers behind him, he would be on a one-way journey. He’d not be back. We would not expect to see him again in this life. It was a short trip to death. That’s what the cross was for.

So, there is a principle of self-renunciation, a cross principle, to which the believer is committed: *Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”* (vv 24-26). Jim Elliott, the 20th century martyr, wrote before he was speared to death by the Auca Indians in South America, “He is no fool who gives away what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose”. Jesus calls you and me to say goodbye to all those things, so dear to our hearts, round which we build our own self-esteem, in order to put all our trust, not in ourselves, but in Him; not in our own abilities, and achievements, and personalities, and looks; but in God’s saving love for us.

It is actually no bad bargain: *“What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”* (v 26). Jesus knew what He was talking about. He knows the price of eternal life for you and me, because He paid it Himself when He died on the cross (as this Lord’s supper reminds us this evening). But nor does Jesus undervalue the world, because He created it and He upholds it. We can trust Him...and His words to us: *“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it”* (v 25). That is how we enter into our full humanity. That is what it is to be truly human—to give life away.

But we will never be able to see human life in this way unless we can see beyond human life. And so we end with:

4) Looking below the surface and beyond the end

(vv 26-28)

Think of a 3D poster again—if you stare at the surface, the picture never emerges. You have to focus beyond it. You and I have to focus our eyes beyond this world to see the truth about it.

Verse 27 is a verse about a Person, more than it is about a time or an event: *“For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done”* (v 27). A Person of infinite glory, power, authority and justice. It is as though our lives are silhouetted against a background—not a landscape, or a sunset, but the Person of Jesus. Like the 3D picture, we cannot make sense of our own lives until we de-focus our eyes from the surface appearances of our lives, and refocus them on this gigantic figure beyond. There will come a time when His true glory will be obvious to all: *“For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done”* (v 27).

But it is already apparent too: *“I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom”* (v 28). For those with the eyes to see, the cross and the resurrection inaugurated the kingdom of the Son of Man, for that kingdom comes with every person who accepts Jesus Christ as their Saviour and King. *“I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom”* (v 28). At conversion we see that starting to happen. And that is the backdrop for understanding our lives. “It is only as Christ is seen for what He really is that other things can be seen for what they really are” (Leon Morris). Want to make sense of your life? Look more closely at Jesus. Want to live better? Look more closely at Jesus.