

Sunday service

from the United Reformed Church



Sunday 23rd August 2026
Proper 16 | Ordinary Time 21
The Revd Tafadzwa Kasere

Who do you say that I am?



愚木混株 Yumu | unsplash.com

Opening Music

Wise men seeking Jesus

by Glenfinlas, performed by Kingston upon Thames URC 2022

Welcome

Welcome in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We gather today as people called by Christ, shaped by grace, and invited again to listen for God's living Word. Whether we come with confidence or questions, with faith that feels strong or faith that feels fragile, we come because Christ calls us by name. Let us prepare ourselves to worship God.

Call to Worship

We come because Christ calls us.

We come to listen for the living God.

In a world of many voices and competing claims,

we seek the voice of Christ.

Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”

**Lord Jesus Christ, open our hearts, shape our faith,
and lead us in your way. Amen.**

Hymn *Come, Let Us Sing To The Lord Our Song*

Jim Strathdee © 1977, Desert Flower Music OneLicence # A-734713

Recorded by Musicians of Golden Ears United Church

Come, let us sing
to the Lord our song:
we have stood silently too long;
surely the Lord
deserves our praise,
so joyfully thank
God for our days.

2. O thirsty soul,
come drink at the well;
God's living waters will never fail.
Surely the Lord
will help you to stand,
strengthened and comforted
by God's hand.

3. You dwell among us
and cause us to pray,
And walk with each other
following your way;
our precious brothers
and sisters will grow
in the fulfilling love they know.

4. Deserts shall bloom
and mountains shall sing
to the desire
of all living things.
Come, all you creatures,
high and low;
let your praises endlessly flow.

Prayer of Approach

Living God, You are not distant or silent,
but active and present among your people.

You speak through Scripture, through the life of Christ,
and through the quiet prompting of your Spirit.
As we worship today, draw us into your truth,
challenge what needs to change, and renew our trust in you.
We offer this worship not to impress,
but to respond — through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Confession

Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? Unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test!

(2 Corinthians 13:5)

God of grace,
we confess that we often repeat words of faith
without letting them shape our lives.
We confess that we listen to the loudest voices rather than the wisest ones.
We confess that we sometimes prefer safety to faithfulness,
comfort to courage and familiarity to trust.
Forgive us, gracious God.
Renew us by your Spirit, that we may confess Christ
not only with our lips but with our lives.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Assurance of Forgiveness

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation."

(2 Corinthians 5:17-19)

Hear the good news.

God does not wait for perfect faith, but meets us with faithful love.
In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven, renewed, and called again into hope.
Thanks be to God. Amen.

Hymn *Amazing grace*

John Newton (1725-1807) Public Domain BBC Songs of Praise

Amazing grace –
how sweet the sound -
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost,
but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.

3 Through many dangers,
toils and snares,
I have already come;
'tis grace hath brought me
safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.

2 'Twas grace first taught
my heart to fear,
and grace my fears relieved;
how precious did
that grace appear
the hour I first believed.

4 When we've been there
ten thousand years
bright shining as the sun,
we've no less days
to sing God's praise
than when we've first begun.

Reading *St Matthew 16: 13-20*

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth

shall be loosed in heaven." Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

Hymn *Jesus Calls Us! O'er The Tumult*

Cecil Frances Alexander (née Humphreys) (1818-1895) Public Domain

Singers from the Episcopal Church of the Advocate, Chapel Hill, NC

Jesus calls us o'er the tumult
of our life's wild, restless sea;
day by day his clear voice soundeth,
saying, 'Christian, follow me;'

2 As of old Saint Andrew heard it,
by the Galilean lake,
turned from home & toil & kindred,
leaving for all for his dear sake.

3 Jesus calls us from the worship
of the vain world's golden store,

from each idol that would keep us,
saying, 'Christian, love me more.'

4 In our joys and in our sorrows,
days of toil and hours of ease,
still he calls, in cares and pleasures,
'Christian, love me more than these.'

5 Jesus calls us! By thy mercies,
Saviour, may we hear thy call,
give our hearts to thy obedience,
serve and love thee best of all.

Sermon "Who Do You Say That I Am?"

Introduction

I remember a moment when someone asked me, 'Why do you follow Jesus?' I answered, but later I realized Jesus was asking me something deeper: not what others say about Him, but what I truly believe. Matthew 16 brings us to that same moment, Jesus asks his disciples a profound question that still resonates with us today: "Who do you say that I am?" This question is not just about identifying Jesus; it's about understanding our relationship with Him. As we reflect on this passage, let's explore the significance of Jesus' question and how it applies to our lives as Christians.

I. The Question of Jesus in a Plural World

Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" In Caesarea Philippi, a city known for its Roman imperial loyalty and Greek and Canaanite worship, Jesus is confronted with competing truth claims. Yet, He doesn't retreat to safety; instead, He brings the question of identity into the heart of these competing voices. Caesarea Philippi: A Place Shaped by... Competing Loyalties, Caesarea Philippi confronted people with multiple claims on their allegiance: loyalty to Rome and the emperor, loyalty to local rulers such as Herod Philip, loyalty to ancestral gods and cults. Jesus asks his question where allegiance is already divided. This highlights that faith is never merely intellectuality but is about who or what ultimately commands our loyalty. Christ is not one voice among many. Faith requires discernment about what we truly serve—nation, economy, identity, tradition, or Christ alone. Political Power The city bore the name of Caesar. Imperial propaganda portrayed the emperor as saviour and lord. Jesus' question therefore challenges political theology: Who truly saves? Who truly rules? Who has the final word?

We recognise this dynamic today. We know: what people say about faith, what social media says about Jesus, what culture assumes Christianity represents. But knowing about belief is not the same as living from belief. As Christians, we often find ourselves in similar situations. We're surrounded by diverse perspectives, and it's easy to get caught up in the noise. But Jesus' question reminds us that our faith is not about following the crowd; it's about discerning the truth. Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" is a call to discernment and understanding of our relationship with Him. When faced with peer pressure or societal expectations, do we stand firm in our confession of faith or compromise our values? Let's reflect on how our daily choices and actions reflect our understanding of Jesus and our relationship with Him.

II. From Public Opinion to Personal Confession

When Jesus asks, "But who do you say that I am?" He's not looking for a

superficial answer. He wants to know what's in our hearts. The phrase “But you...” places emphatic stress on the disciples. It is plural. Jesus does not ask Peter alone. He addresses the whole community of disciples. Peter's response, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," is a testament to the revelation of God's grace. Faith, in Matthew's Gospel, is never merely individual—it is communal discernment leading to personal response. Faith is not inherited automatically. Tradition must be received critically and gratefully. Each generation must confess Christ anew. Second-hand belief may inform us—but it cannot sustain discipleship.

This is like the difference between: knowing what scientists say about climate change and deciding how you will live, vote, consume, and act. Information alone does not transform. Commitment does. Faith is not just about intellectual assent; it's about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Just as a romantic relationship involves commitment, trust, and communication, our relationship with Jesus requires regular prayer, Bible study, and obedience to His teachings.

Let's prioritize quality time with God, seeking to deepen our understanding of His love and will for our lives. Congregations must ask: Who do we say Christ is in this place? Councils must discern: What does faithfulness look like here and now? Individual believers must ask: How does my life reflect this confession? Our confession is not just a statement; it's a declaration of our allegiance to Christ.

III. Peter's Confession: A Gift of Grace

Peter's confession is not a human achievement; it's a gift of God's revelation. Jesus says, "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." This reminds us that faith is not something we can manufacture; it's a gift from God. Peter's confession is tightly structured and theologically rich. “the Messiah”: the anointed one, God's promised agent “the Son of the living God”: not a metaphor, but a claim about divine life and authority This

confession places Jesus above prophets, kings, and political powers. Jesus responds not by institutionalizing authority, but by identifying revelation. “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you...” Faith, Jesus insists, is not the result of: intelligence, spiritual achievement, or moral effort. It is gift.

Recognising faith is like recognising life itself. Faith may function impressively. But only a living being has life within itself. Faith recognises the living God—not because we generate belief, but because we encounter life. Peter's confession is a gift of God's revelation, and we can trust in God's faithfulness. Consider a time when you experienced a profound sense of God's presence or guidance. How did it impact your faith and relationship with Him? Let's acknowledge the role of God's revelation in our lives and express gratitude for His grace and mercy. As we reflect on our own faith journey, let's remember that our understanding of Christ is not solely based on our efforts; it's rooted in God's gracious revelation. Space must be made for learning, doubt, and growth. Confidence rests in God's faithfulness, not human clarity.

IV. "On This Rock"

Jesus says, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." The rock refers to the confession of faith, not Peter himself. Our unity and foundation are in Christ, and we're built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. The wordplay between Petros (Peter) and petra (rock) is real—but not simplistic. Matthew does not say the Church is built on Peter alone, but on what Peter has confessed. The Reformed tradition consistently interprets: the “rock” as Christ-confessing faith, the foundation as Christ himself. Scripture interprets Scripture: “No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 3:11). “I Will Build My Church” The future tense matters. Christ—not the Church—remains the active subject. This is pastorally vital in times of: decline, transition, and anxiety.

Think of community regeneration: broken systems persist, change is slow but faithful presence reshapes space over time. The Church participates in Christ's work—it does not replace it. The Church is built on Christ-confessing faith, and we're called to be a community that reflects Christ's love and values. In a world that often values power, wealth, and status, the Church stands out as a community built on the foundation of Christ's love and sacrifice. Let's strive to be a community that reflects Christ's love and values, serving others and pointing them to Him. As a Church, we recognize that our authority is not in our structures or traditions; it's in our confession of Christ. We're called to be a community that points to Christ, not ourselves.

V. The Keys and Shared Discernment

Jesus gives Peter the keys to the kingdom, symbolizing responsibility and authority. However, this authority is not about domination; it's about service. We're called to exercise discernment together, prayerfully and scripturally, as we seek to follow Christ. The verbs “bind” and “loose” were rabbinic terms referring to teaching and interpretation, not domination. Authority belongs to Christ alone. The Church serves ministerially. Decisions are accountable to Scripture. Binding and loosing involve: naming forgiveness, exercising care and discipline, proclaiming grace truthfully, conciliar discernment. URC polity reflects this shared responsibility: Ministers and elders together, Councils and assemblies, prayerful listening. No one individual controls the keys.

Like a signpost: it does not determine the destination, it points faithfully toward it. In our church, we recognize the importance of shared discernment and accountability. We come together to make decisions, not as individual authorities, but as a community seeking to follow Christ. Decisions must be prayerful and scripturally rooted. Power must serve people, not preserve status. The Church exists to open doors, not guard privilege. Authority in the Church is about service and shared discernment. Just as Jesus washed the disciples' feet, demonstrating His servant

leadership, we are called to serve others in humility and love. Let's prioritize servant leadership and shared discernment in our church, seeking to follow Christ's example and empower one another in our walk with Him.

Conclusion

As we conclude our reflection on Matthew 16:13-20, we're reminded that Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" is not just a question for the disciples; it's a question for us today. How we answer this question will shape our lives, our relationships, and our witness. Let's summarize the key points we've explored:

- Jesus' question calls us to discernment and understanding of our relationship with Him.
- Faith is not just about intellectual assent; it's about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.
- Peter's confession is a gift of God's revelation, and we can trust in God's faithfulness.
- The Church is built on Christ-confessing faith, and we're called to be a community that reflects Christ's love and values.
- Authority in the Church is about service and shared discernment.
- As we go forward, let's commit to:
- Reflecting on our understanding of Jesus and our relationship with Him daily.
- Prioritizing our personal relationship with Jesus through prayer, Bible study, and obedience.
- Serving others in humility and love, demonstrating Christ's love to the world.
- Seeking shared discernment and accountability in our decision-making, pointing to Christ and His teachings.

Christ still asks: "Who do you say that I am?" Not only in words, but in: how we use power, whom we welcome, what we prioritise, where we place our hope. Let's affirm our faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God. Let's

recognize that our confession is a gift of God's grace, and let's seek to follow Christ with humility, discernment, and obedience. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us always, guiding us and empowering us to live out our confession of faith with humility, discernment, and obedience. Amen.

Hymn *Christ is the world's true light*

Fred Pratt Green (1903-2000) © 1969 Stainer & Bell Ltd. Recorded at the Parish of the Good Samaritan, Brisbane, Australia. OneLicence No. # A-734713

Christ is the world's light,
Christ and none other;
born in our darkness,
he became our brother.
If we have seen him,
we have seen the Father:
Glory to God on high!

2 Christ is the world's peace,
Christ and none other;
no one can serve him
and despise another.
Who else unites us,
one in God the Father?
Glory to God on high!

3 Christ is the world's life,
Christ and none other;
sold once for silver,
murdered here, our brother -
he, who redeems us,
reigns with God the Father:
Glory to God on high!

4 Give God the glory,
God and none other;
give God the glory,
Spirit, Son and Father;
give God the glory,
God with us, my brother:
Glory to God on high!

Affirmation of Faith

**We believe in God the Father,
from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.**

**We believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who calls us to follow, to serve, and to trust God's future.**

**We believe in the Holy Spirit, who leads the Church into truth
and sends us into the world in hope.**

We are one Church, called to confess Christ,

to seek justice, and to live by grace. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Living God, we pray for your Church,
that it may confess Christ faithfully in word and action.
We pray for our world, where many voices compete for attention,
and where truth is often distorted.
We pray for those with power,
that they may govern with humility and justice.
We pray for those who suffer, those who doubt,
and those who feel forgotten.
In silence, we name before you those on our hearts today.

Silence

Faithful God, hear our prayers,
for we offer them in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father...

Hymn *Will you come and follow me*

John L Bell (born 1949) and Graham Maule (1958-2019)

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Performed by Ruth and Joy Everingham and used with their kind permission.

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown, will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown, in you and you in me?

2 Will you leave yourself behind
if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind
and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare
should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer
in you and you in me?

3 Will you let the blinded see
if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free
and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean,
and do such as this unseen,
and admit to what I mean
in you and you in me?

4 Will you love the 'you' you hide
if I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside
and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found
to reshape the world around,
through my sight & touch & sound
in you and you in me?

5 Lord, your summons echoes true
when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you
and never be the same.
In your company I'll go
where your love & footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow
in you and you in me

Blessing

Go now, trusting not in your own strength,
but in the faithfulness of Christ.
And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God the Father,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all,
now and always. Amen.

Closing Music

*Nun Danket Alle Gott – Marche Triomphale (“Now thank
we all our God”)*

by Sigfrid Karg-Elert (organ of All Saints', Odiham – 2020)

Sources

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