

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
23 August 2026

Matthew 16:13-20

I grew up in a culture where a person's identity is derived from a number of sources: What they do for a living, family of origin, an event in their own history (the chicken thief, the madwoman, the jailbird, etc.), or by a cruel or simple nickname often derived from a physical characteristic (Fat Nelly, Lazy Eye Jose, Carlos the Midget, etc.) The consequence of identifying people in this manner is that you seldom know anyone beyond those simple labels and cruel nicknames.

And yet, public opinion is a good indicator of our place in the community. A great deal of effort is done to rehabilitate our public image after a mistake or when you have inherited a bad reputation from a family member. In many ways, public opinion was also very important during the time of Jesus. Where a person is from or what their family do for a living play an important role in the honor ascribed to the person (Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Isn't this the carpenter's son?) In today's passage in Matthew, Jesus wants to know what people think about him and what his disciples make of his preaching, teaching, and miracles. But Jesus is less concerned about his reputation than about people misunderstanding his mission to inaugurate the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Sadly, the answer the disciples give him to his first question shows that most people have partial and inaccurate information about who he is and what he is doing.

The issue of identity is important for Matthew. This is why he starts his Gospel giving us a genealogy of "Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Jesus the Messiah, "belongs in a long line of faithful servants of God, prophets willing to stake their lives for the sake of God's people." (Eric Barreto, [Working Preacher](#)). Jesus has a root system that reaches back to the very origin of Israel through Abraham and Sarah. His identity is thoroughly Jewish and his mission is to fulfill the expectations and aspirations of the Jewish people in the Jewish scriptures. He is the answer to what the Old Testament identified as the major issue of Judaism. He is the perfectly obedient human whose love of God fulfills the Law perfectly and brings about God's reign to earth as in heaven.

Let us review the setting of the passage before we look at the questions. According to Eugene Boring's commentary,

"Caesarea Philippi, about twenty miles north of the Sea of Galilee, had earlier been the site of a Baal cultic center... but was renamed by Herod the

Great after he built there a temple to Caesar Augustus... (His Son, Phillip) enlarged the town and named it after Tiberius Caesar and himself. During the war of 66-70, Caesarea was a recreation spot for the Roman general Vespasian, who began the siege of Jerusalem and then left his son Titus in charge... when he became emperor. After the fall of Jerusalem, Titus and his troops returned to Caesarea, where... he had some of the Jewish captives thrown to wild animals.”

For those who know their national history the setting of this passage is important because it places Jesus of Nazareth as a potential rival to pagan religions and the Roman empire. Let us review the first question. Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Some translate this title “Son of Man” as simply meaning “human,” which is the sense the prophet Ezekiel uses, “Who do the people say this human is?” But for those who have read Daniel 7 and remember that the title “Son of Man” is given to one who has been vindicated and placed at the right hand of the Ancient of Days in the heavenly throne, this title takes on another meaning. I believe that when Jesus uses this title he is talking about his full identity as a human and as the Son of God who proceeds from the Father and shares the Father’s divinity.

The disciples answered, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” The things Jesus does and says lead people to believe that he is like one of the prophets of old. He is like John the Baptist, the last of the prophets, in his call to repentance and his challenge of the hypocrisy of Pharisees and other leaders. He is like Elijah in some of his miracles (miraculous provision of food, raising a widow’s son from the dead, control over events of nature like droughts and rain, etc.) In Matthew, (the only evangelist who mentions Jeremiah,) he is like the prophet when he weeps over Jerusalem, when he judges the hypocritical behaviors of religious authorities, and when he predicts the destruction of the temple. Sadly, although these comparisons are true, they present a very limited view of Jesus’ identity and mission.

The second question is more important because there is a personal relationship with those to whom he poses the question, “But who do you say that I am?” This is a plural “you.” The fact that Peter, as representative of the group, answers the question should not obscure the fact that all of them must answer this question for themselves. Some will see Jesus as a revolutionary, some as a prophet like those in antiquity, some as the Messiah who was to come, and some as an itinerant moral teacher. We know how Peter answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” This is such an important answer that it is only possible

through the revelation of God's Holy Spirit. This confession is so fundamental that Jesus affirms it will be the very foundation of an unshakable, universal Church.

I want to return briefly to the issue of setting, "Matthew brings the scene of Jesus' confession as the Jewish Messiah into the shadow of a Caesar temple, where the Roman destroyers of Jerusalem had celebrated their victory, a revered site long associated with both pagan and Jewish revelatory events." (Ibid, p. 342). And, I believe, this is the reason why Jesus asks the disciples to keep the revelation to themselves for now. That kind of talk would have sparked images of political independence. He did not want the crowd's revolutionary aspirations for an Israel free of Roman control to get in the way of his real mission.

In the same way the Apostles are asked to answer the question in their own unique way, we too must answer the question, "Who do we say the Son of Man is?" For some, Jesus is the ticket of admission into wealthy and exclusive clubs where they can rub shoulders with the rich and powerful. Others believe Jesus is an insurance policy they hold on to just in case what the Bible says is true. For many, Jesus is a moral teacher who dies for us so we can one day go to heaven. For others, Jesus is a generous friend who demands very little, if anything, from them and they get to see once a week in church. Sadly, others see him as a priest or pastor who cares deeply about whether women are wearing the right outfits to church and the acolytes are wearing black shoes when they serve at the altar. How a person sees Jesus determines their relationship with God and with others.

Many of these answers have glimpses of the truth, but each is an incomplete answer in its own way. Jesus is the Son of God, sent into the world on a rescue mission to right what went terribly wrong with God's perfect creation. His mission is to be the new temple, the meeting place where the Divine meets the creation, and the creation enters into communion with the divine. Jesus is the way to the Father and the very gate through which we enter into a relationship with God. He is the perfect human who fulfils Israel's vocation to be perfectly obedient, to be a blessing to the nations, and to fulfil perfectly God's law. He is the true king who will judge all powers and principalities for their cruelty and inhumanity. He is Messiah and liberator who releases the world from the power of evil and gives us the ability to worship God with honesty and sincerity. He is the I AM, the God with us whose mission it is to establish God's rule on earth as it is in heaven.

Anything less than this is an insufficient understanding of the Son of Man. May he continue to bless us. Amen!