

13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost A 27 August 2023  
Matthew 16:13-20  
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth  
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

*Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'* Let's pray: ...

I'd like you to think about your ol' school days - bit of a stretch, I know. How many of you had teachers who would lob a surprise attack on you and terrify you with a pop quiz? That's what I want to do to you now, but don't panic, no-one will be sent to the headmaster's office.

Here's the first question. Do you think Peter got it right when he said that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God?" Let's have a show of hands, a nod, or a wink. Looks like everyone. Anyone disagree? No? Everyone agrees with Peter that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God"?

Tick. Congratulations, you're correct. Here's the second question, and it's a tricky one: So what?

What does it mean for you today that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God"? That question is at the centre of a conversation I've been having with myself (yes, I talk to myself – make of it what you will) for years, but even more so in light of everything that's happened in the last few years. I don't know about you, but I feel there's an urgency and intensity about everything these days, including this question about who Jesus is.

So, what does it mean for us today to say that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God"? I believe this is challenging us like never before. I think we're discovering a deeper and more relevant understanding of what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

I thought I had a pretty good idea of what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah. It used to be something I thought of occasionally, but more recently it's become an everyday kind of question. It used to be about the future, but now it's about the present. What is it that Jesus wants most for us to know about him; what he does; what he wants? I believe it's about changing hearts. If Jesus isn't changing your heart and my heart, then he's not the Messiah of our lives. And if he is our Messiah, then he necessarily changes how we live.

The era we live in is characterised by division and distancing. There's always a wedge being driven between one person and another. Nationalism and tribalism is on the rise globally. And yet, we are so interdependent and interconnected; we require people to work together so that human societies don't fall into chaos. As a result, I feel challenged to expand the boundaries of me and mine – my life, my family, my needs, my community, my people, my country.

So, when the Messiah says something like "love your neighbour" I have to reassess who my neighbour is and what obligation that places on me. And if I follow the Messiah as "the way, the truth, and the life", what does that ask of me in my marriage, my parenting, and my close familial relationships? How does it shape my friendships, and what does it say about my worldview as a proud Aussie? Am I discerning between the light and darkness in what I read on social media or hear on the news? What happens when his way, truth, and life conflict with the way, the truth, and the life of my mates, my family, my country?

And how many more times must the Messiah say, "Peace be with you," or "Do not be afraid," before I take those words to heart? If he really is my Messiah, then I have to look at my values, my priorities, and the truths I claim for myself and see if they align with his. When he says, "Follow me," do I go, or do I blaze my own path?

The Messiah, the Son of the living God, Jesus, wants to rule over every part of my life. Sometimes I'm comfortable with that; at other times I resist it.

These are the kinds of things I must sincerely reflect upon when I think of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Think about the ways this makes a difference to the way you view your life. Is Messiah, Son of the living God, just a title we give Jesus or is he asking something of us? Is it changing how we think and live, and if not, why do we come here Sunday after Sunday?

I ask these questions because I struggle with the tension of living in the gap between knowing the correct answer and doing something about it?

I think this is what Jesus is preparing Peter for in today's gospel. I think St Paul addresses the same thing in today's epistle when he warns us about being conformed to this world rather than being transformed to discern God's will. And I think Jesus wrestled with this intensely in the Garden of Gethsemane as the full implication of his Father's will became apparent.

It's not enough to just give the correct answer. Think back to your school days again; particularly the subject of mathematics. Did you, like me, get the answers correct but lose marks for failing to show your calculations, with "Show me your work" plastered across the page in bright red ink?

I wonder if that's why Jesus "sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah." Maybe he's less interested in our answer and more interested in seeing our work. Maybe Jesus is saying to us, "Show me what the kingdom looks like in your life, in your relationships, in how you serve others."

The kingdom comes locally, temporarily, intermittently, episodically in our particular circumstances through what we bind and what we loose. The kingdom comes whenever we love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, pray for those who abuse us, turn the other cheek to those who strike us, welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, forgive our offender, shelter the homeless, comfort the fearful.

The kingdom isn't our reward for these works; the kingdom is these "good works which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Ephesians 2:10). Wherever these works are being done, there the kingdom exists also. The kingdom comes every time you and I make incarnate the will of God.

We can stand up every day and declare that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God", but what difference does it make if we're not loosing people from injustice, racism, hunger, poverty, guilt, shame, fear, anger? What difference does it make if we're not loosing people to go in peace? What difference does it make if we're not binding ourselves to each other in love, compassion, forgiveness, hospitality, healing, hope, prayer? What difference does it make if we're not binding up the broken- hearted?

I don't just want to give the right answer. I want to do the right answer, be part of the right answer, reflect the light of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Don't you? However, I'm also acutely aware of my shortcomings. I have no doubt that I am much more like Peter, than like Jesus.

We've each been given the keys of the kingdom, the power to bind and the power to loose. But there are many challenges ahead of us and we won't experience a straight, flat, smooth road; rather, a journey into the unknown with many twists and turns, peaks and troughs, and dead ends here and there.

The Christian life of each of us resembles that of Peter's. We make a confession of faith, or our baptismal sponsors make it on our behalf. From then on, we're either falling short of this confession of faith, or living out its implications.

Where are you on that journey? You may be in one of those low places that Peter came to. You may feel you're past the point of getting up again. But here's good news for your bad news: each of us is just like Peter. Irrespective of what we do, Jesus won't leave us, reject us, deny us, or give up on us. Jesus isn't ashamed of us and he certainly won't abandon us (Matthew 28:20).

Saints, while it's important for each of us to acknowledge that we have our limits, imagine how exhilarating it must be to contemplate a life where all things are possible with God (Matthew 19:26). May we bind ourselves together with unwavering love and commitment to God's will and each other. May we loosen our grip on the reins of the Gospel in our hearts so that it may run amok in the hearts of our neighbours. And may we rejoice in our confession of faith and receive the blessing bestowed on Peter for the sake of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of the living God, the Name above all names, our Lord, our King, and our Saviour. Your kingdom come and Your will be done, Lord. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.