

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 22:19-23; Psalm 138 (137); Romans 11:36-37; Matthew 16:13-20

“But who do you say that I am?”

Matt 16:13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14 And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16 Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” 17 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. 18 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. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” 20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This story is Matthew’s version of Mark 8:27-30. There is a parallel version in Luke 9:18-20 (a typically different reception of the same tradition can be found in John 6:66-68). It is clear across the New Testament that Peter was a key figure in the early church—all four Gospels, the letters of Paul and the Acts of the Apostles assure us of this. The foundation for this role is not simply in the call of Jesus or in resurrection appearances to Peter, but in his confession of Jesus’ identity in the scene at Caesarea Philippi. The “Petrine office” of the bishop of Rome finds its theological grounding in vv. 18-19.

KIND OF WRITING

Like many passages in the Gospels, this is a typical *chreia*, in question and answer form, with an expanded “blessed” saying. The expansions in Matthew are interesting. Compare these two versions:

Mark 8:27 Jesus *went on* with his disciples to the *villages* of Caesarea Philippi;

and *on the way* he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” 28 And they *answered* him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” 29 He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”

Matt 16:13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14 And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others *Jeremiah* or one of the prophets.” 15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16 *Simon* Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” 17 *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. 18 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. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”*

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

- (i) The expectation that “one of the prophets” would come back is based on Deuteronomy 18:15, in a reference to Moses.
- (ii) The expectation that Elijah would return to usher in final salvation is based on Malachi 4:4-5.
- (iii) “Son of God” or even “child of God” may be said of every Israelite, man or woman, on account of the covenant. However, there is a special use of Son of God in a higher sense is found early in the New Testament, and reflects Jesus’ own relationship with God (Abba, father).

(iv) The expectation that there would be an anointed agent of salvation (messiah / Christ) is not really present in the Old Testament, but it is found in the books between the OT and the NT, such

Thought for the day

When Jesus presses the question, *who do you say I am?*, we feel him speaking to us. Naturally, we think of our faith now in the light of our own journey of life and pilgrimage of faith. How did I start out? What was my image of Jesus then and how did I relate to him? Have there been major turning points for me and can I name one or two? How have I deepened my familiarity with Jesus and who is he for me now? If I were to choose an image or a metaphor what would come to kind? If I were to explain to someone what my faith in Jesus is, what words would I use?

Prayer

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. (Eph. 3:14-17)

as the Psalms of Solomon and the Dead Sea Scrolls. These documents are not part of the Bible; nevertheless, they help us enormously in understanding the hopes of some Jews in the early first century.

(v) “Flesh and blood” is a Semitic expression meaning frail humanity.

(vi) “Rock” is a regular image in the Psalms for God’s strength.

(vii) “Son of Man” is a regular expression the Old Testament and can refer to any human being. However, in Dan 7:13 the term gets a special meaning as agent of salvation. This special meaning lies behind Jesus’ special use of the term throughout his ministry.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

The sentence about binding and losing is repeated in Matt 18:18 *Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in*

heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. This may well reflect the emergence of a church structure in the areas around Antioch and Syria associated with Peter and with the writing of this Gospel. This is the only Gospel to use the technical term “assembly” (= church) and it preserves five blocks of unique material about Peter (Matt. 14:28-31; 15:15-20; 16:18-19; 17:24-27; 18:21-22).

“And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed (this) to you, but my Father who is in heaven’” (16:17). This verse adds strength to the suggestion that we may be dealing with an originally post-resurrectional context. The clause, “flesh and blood has not revealed [apokalyptein] this to you” is remarkably similar to Paul’s description of his experience with the resurrected Jesus in Gal 1:16: when God “was pleased to reveal [apokalyptein] his Son to me [...] I did not confer with flesh and blood.” Both Matthew and Galatians contrast a revelation from God with mere human information (“flesh and blood”). In all likelihood neither is dependent on the other; more probably, both have taken up a traditional way of describing post-resurrectional appearances.

And I tell you, you are Peter; and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (16:18). The argument for a pre-Matthean origin for the basic material contained in this verse is strengthened by the recognition of an Aramaic substratum lying behind Matthew’s Greek. In Aramaic the Greek play on the word “Peter” is marked by an identity: “You are *Kepha* and upon this *kepha* I will build my church.” Further, the Semitisms, “gates of Hades” as well as “flesh and blood” and “bind and loose,” all suggest that 16:17–19 originated in an Aramaic-speaking environment. The setting of this verse is in all probability post-resurrectional.

While one should not exclude the possibility that Jesus might have thought of building a church in the sense of organising a people in preparation for the imminent end, the reference to the “gates of Hades” not prevailing over the church does seem to suggest a permanence which would go beyond the supposed intentions of the earthly Jesus. The intentions expressed here cohere more closely with those post-resurrectional appearances described previously as “church-founding.”

What exactly is meant by the power to

bind and loose? These two verbs in combination are found in at least two different contexts in rabbinic literature. Most often they are used in the sense of imposing or removing an obligation by an authoritative decision. These verbs are also used in the sense of imposing or lifting a ban of excommunication. Which meaning is intended in Matt 16:19 and 18:18? Are the meanings identical or are they being used in different ways?

A key issue is to what extent 16:19 gives Peter a responsibility that is distinguished from that given to the other disciples. Some have understood Matt 16:19 as representing the first usage; Peter seen as a chief rabbi issuing binding rules in contrast to “the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (16:12), and Matt 18:18 as representing the second usage. Such a view presupposes Matthew’s congregation as one which had recently emerged from within Judaism and is now in tension with it.

ST PAUL

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31–39 NRSV adjusted)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 13 Caesarea Philippi had associations with Baal and with Pan. The sacred nature may contrast with the confession here. “Son of Man” is used in the strong sense based Daniel.

Verse 14 This list reflects the OT

above. Alone in the Gospels, Matthew names the prophet Jeremiah and seems to have a special interest in him (Matt 2:17; 16:14; 27:9).

Verse 15 The direct question jumps out of the text and speak to us today.

Verse 16 Matthew adds “Son of the living God”. Compare: “But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, ‘I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.’” (Matt 26:63 NRSV)

Verse 17 Starting with a beatitude, the text seems to move on to a report of a revelation, which many scholars think of as after the Resurrection. The resurrection appearance to Peter is reported in the NT but never narrated.

Verse 18 The new role for Peter as Rabbi for the Christian community is described here.

Verse 19 This has to do with inclusion and exclusion in the church – an embryonic form of the later penitential practice and of the much later excommunication laws.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. This marks a turning point in the life of Jesus, and of the disciples. It is the first time that his disciples recognise him as the Messiah. Recall turning points in your own journey of faith when you came to some deeper understanding of who Jesus is.

2. “Who do you say that I am?” This is possibly the most important question that Jesus puts to us. In your heart of hearts, how do you answer this question today?

3. Jesus praises Peter for his faith and comments that this was not his own doing but a gift of God. Perhaps there have been times when you have been conscious of the gift nature of your faith. Be thankful for the gift you have received.

PRAYER

Living God, you sent your Son among us to reveal your wisdom and make known your ways. Increase our faith, that we may confess Jesus as your Son, take up his work on earth, and trust his promise to sustain the Church.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!

Rom 11:33 O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 34 “For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?” 35 “Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?” 36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The lectionary spares us much of the involved, intense and intricate argumentation of Paul and we join him finally in his confession of God’s mystery. Paul has been investigating the purposes of God reaches the limit of what a human can do. The bright darkness of God touches our hearts, our minds and our words.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

In Romans 9-11, Paul tries with all his considerable ability to understand the role of Jewish non-acceptance of Jesus in God’s plan. This question arose early in the letter in chapter 3 and finally in these three chapters he tries to fathom it all. He does it be a combination of patterns from the past, prophetic texts, midrashic comment and plain reason. As believer, he knows that God has been faithful to Israel, in spite of appearances to the contrary. As a creature before the creator, he knows that the mind of God is beyond our ken and is finally not afraid to say so. In itself this is not a failure but simply the truth of being human. In any case, in some aspects Paul’s projection was mistaken: the end did not take place “soon” and the Jews were not provoked to jealousy to receive the Gospel. The fundamental frame is good, however: all is in the hands of God, we trust and believe.

KIND OF WRITING

9:1-5 Introduction (*exordium*)
 9:6-11:32 Proofs (*probationes*)
 11:33-36 Conclusion (*peroratio*)

Our concluding sentiments exhibit a three-fold pattern:

Three *exclamations* (v. 33)
 Three *questions* (vv. 34-35)
 Three-part *doxology* (v. 36)

This concluding hymn-like passage looks back not only on the preceding three

chapters but on all of Romans thus far. Some scholars think Paul used an already available hymn comprising vv. 33 and 36, which he redacted by inserting vv. 34-35 (a citation and an allusion).

RELATED PASSAGES

Listen, I will tell you a *mystery*: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a moment, in the blinking of an eye, at the last trumpet. (1 Cor 15:51-52)

Instead we speak the wisdom of God, hidden in a *mystery*, that God determined before the ages for our glory. (1 Cor 2:7)

Who has known the mind of the Lord, and who has been his counsellor to instruct him? (Isa 40:13 LXX)

Who has confronted me that I should repay? Everything under heaven belongs to me! (Job 41:11 NET - the LXX and MT are different.)

Yet for us there is one God, the Father, *from whom are all things and for whom we live*, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, *through whom are all things and through whom we live*. (1 Cor 8:6)

This was to demonstrate his righteousness, because God in his forbearance had passed over the sins previously committed. This was also to demonstrate his righteousness in the present time, so that he would be just and the justifier of the one who lives because of Jesus’ faithfulness. (Rom 3:25-26)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 33 The conclusions hopes with “O” (ō) and continues with “how” (hōs). The “riches” of God were mentioned earlier: *Or do you have contempt for the wealth of his kindness, forbearance, and patience, and yet do not know that God’s kindness leads you to repentance?* (Rom 2:4) *Now if their transgression means riches for the world and their defeat means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full restoration bring?* (Rom 11:12; see also 11:30-32 with the emphasis on mercy. The “beyond” of God’s wisdom and knowledge is often reflected upon. Cf. Job 28 for a poetic example. “Unfathomable” is not an especially nautical metaphor. It means unsearchable or inaccessible. “Inscrutable” from v. 33b is also used by the Greek version of Job: *...who does great and inscrutable things, things both glorious and ex-*

traordinary, without number. (Job 5:9)

Paul has in mind here not a generic sense of God’s transcendence but rather the concrete inscrutability of what he achieved in Jesus’ death and resurrection: God imprisoned all in disobedience so at to make know his faithfulness and righteousness in Jesus. Cf. Rom 3:25-26 above.

Verses 34 The questions here correspond to the explanations in v. 33. Thus, v. 34a corresponds to “mind”. V. 34b takes us back to God’s wisdom. Finally, V. 35 corresponds to the riches of God, for which the human can make to adequate return. In addition, v. 34 follows Isaiah 40:3 closely, which v. 35 echoes in some fashion Job 41:11.

Verse 36 This tripartite doxology is very close to 1Cor 8:6 above (see the parts in *italics*). There is a contrast. In 1 Corinthians, the place of Christ comes to the fore, whereas in Romans God is disclosed as origin, agent and goal of all that happens. The only possible response is to give him glory. In the words of the Reformers, to God alone be the glory (*Soli Deo Gloria!*) The divine election and its unfolding in history are beyond our ken. Cf. the exclamation at the start of Romans 9-11: *To them belong the patriarchs, and from them, by human descent, came the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever! Amen.* (Rom 9:5) The language used here echoes Stoic vocabulary. Marcus Aurelius wrote: *all things are from you, all things are in you and all things are for you.*

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. If I were to write my own version of what Paul says here, how would I express it?
2. On my own spiritual journey, how has the “beyond” of God became real for me and part of my relationship with God?
3. As a Christian, living under grace in Christ, I too am part of God’s unfolding purpose — and to God I give the glory!

PRAYER

God, greater than our hearts, higher than our minds, you know us far better than we know ourselves. Help us to live with the mystery of your presence and actions in world. In you we live and move and have our being. To you alone be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David

(Isa 22:15 Thus says the Lord GOD of hosts: Come, go to this steward, to Shebna, who is master of the household, and say to him:)

19 I will thrust you from your office,
and you will be pulled down from your post.

20 On that day I will call my servant
Eliakim son of Hilkiah,
21 and will clothe him with your robe
and bind your sash on him.
I will commit your authority to his hand,
and he shall be a father
to the inhabitants of Jerusalem
and to the house of Judah.

22 I will place on his shoulder
the key of the house of David;
he shall open, and no one shall shut;
he shall shut, and no one shall open.

23 I will fasten him like a peg
in a secure place,
and he will become a throne of honour
to his ancestral house.



INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading is the most detailed description of the role of “master of the household”, effectively “prime minister” in Jerusalem. It is chosen because it deals with authority and uses the imagery of David (= messianic) and key (= literal and metaphorical).

ORIGIN OF THE WRITING

Isaiah 22, a highly dramatic chapter, has five moments. It tells of the story of a change of administration, in which Shebna is replaced by Eliakim.

1-8: Jerusalem is addressed and chided.
9-14: the royal house is held responsible.
15-19: Shebna, a high official, is judged.
20-24: Shebna’s successor is addressed.
25: Judah and Jerusalem will collapse.

(i) It was written before the Assyrian invasion of 705-701, under Sennacherib (who built the famous rampart at Lachish to take the city). Perhaps the prophet disapproved of the strategy of defence, because it showed lack of trust in YHWH.

(ii) Alternatively, it may have been written after the surprising deliverance of the city, when inappropriate celebrations failed to take account of God’s act of deliverance. According to the Annals of Sennacherib, the crack troops of

Hezekiah deserted him in 701. Isaiah concludes that the deliverance of the city was of divine and not human origin. It is not known why the Assyrians suddenly went home. This timing is assumed by most recent commentators.

KIND OF WRITING

Our reading is part of a prophetic oracle. Vv. 20-24 describe the role and authority of the king’s majordomo. In these verses, the king continues to speak, no longer addressing Shebna but speaking *about* his successor.

RELATED READINGS

The king of Assyria sent the Tartan, the Rab-saris, and the Rabshakeh with a great army from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem. They went up and came to Jerusalem. When they arrived, they came and stood by the conduit of the upper pool, which is on the highway to the Fuller’s Field. When they called for the king, there came out to them Eliakim son of Hilkiah, who was in charge of the palace, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph, the recorder. (2 Kings 18:17-18; cf. also 2 Kings 19:1-7).

BRIEF COMMENTARY

The change of office holder has the air of musical chairs about it. In itself, the

reading is an interesting vignette from a highly critical moment. For our purposes, the symbolism of office is what counts and not, of course, the predictable failure!!

Verse 15 Shebna is about to be demoted and Isaiah clearly objects to his policies. The subsequent verses go on to say that he will never be buried in his noble tomb in Silwan, but this may be wrong because a tomb there bears the incomplete inscription “This is [the grave of Sheban]yahu who was master of the household”. Our text does not specify who the messenger is — perhaps Isaiah himself?

Verse 19 The change of cabinet is announced. This is somewhat anticlimactic after the dire, even lurid threats in vv. 17-18. Shebna continues as “secretary” under Eliakim.

Verse 20 Eliakim is a known royal court official: 2 Kings 18:17-19:7 = Isa. 36:3-37:7. See the OT texts above. “On that day” means the day of judgment.

Verse 21 Change of apparel = change of office holder. The familial image is like that of shepherding to suggest care.

Verse 22 Symbols of full authority. The full set is: tunic, sash and key to the royal house.

Verse 23 The image of a tent peg is used, suggesting firmness and stability, cover and protection.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Perhaps at some critical time you were entrusted with a significant role of leadership. How did you take on your new role? What kind of continuity was possible with what went before?

2. A key is an image of access and all of us from time to time exercise such a role. Sometimes, we are blocking; other time, we are facilitating. The use and abuse of power of always a human question.

PRAYER

O key of David and sceptre of Israel, what you open no one else can close again; what you close, no one can open. O come and lead the captive from prison; free those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. (O Antiphon)

THE LITURGY

Isaiah 22:19-23; Psalm 138 (137); Romans 11:36-37; Matthew 16:13-20

READINGS 1 AND 3

The imagery of an office holder, with symbols such the key, fits well with the Gospel passage. In particular there is a match in the roles: “should he open, no one shall close, should he close, no one shall open” and “whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven.”

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 138 (137) is a psalm of thanksgiving after deliverance. It thus fits the immediate historical context of the first reading quite well.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 22:19-23

Change of leadership at any time can be critical. It was super critical at the time this was written: the Assyrians were the major threat to Jerusalem. In this reading a new leader is appointed and the role is described symbolically, pointing to the Gospel reading.

Second reading

Romans 11:36-37

Awareness of the profound otherness of God is a necessary part of religious experience. Paul has just been reflecting on God’s plan of salvation for Jews and Gentiles. He knows, however, that even he has no access to God’s “mind”!

Gospel

Matthew 16:13-20

Our reading is in two parts. The question in the first part is a question for any time—but perhaps especially today. The higher role of Peter remains a question today—it nature and the best way of putting it into practice.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 28 August

St Augustine, bishop and doctor

For the next week and half or so, we hear from 1 Thessalonians, the first letter of Paul to come down to us. Evident-

ly Paul had evangelised city of Thessalonica about the year AD 49. He then moved on through Athens to Corinth. In the meantime, the new believers in Thessalonica experienced some kind of oppression or harassment. They contacted Paul and he sent Timothy. The letter is in response to Timothy’s report.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5, 8-10

We begin reading today from the earliest surviving Christian document, Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians. Paul had founded this community in Greece and then had to move on. Subsequently, they experienced considerable hardship on account of being believers. Paul writes to reassure them and to answer some questions they sent him.

Matthew 23:13-22

The Jesus of this story is stern, but be careful not to leave it in the past. His teaching is for us today as well.

Tuesday 29 August

The Beheading of John the Baptist

1 Thessalonians 3:7-13

In our first reading today, Paul summarises his great love for the Christians in Thessalonica. It is a striking expression of real emotional dependence—something we might be uncomfortable with today. He brings this section to a conclusion with a prayer that God might allow him to visit them.

Mark 6:17-29

The gospel—special for the feast—tells the story of the death of John the Baptist. It is a grisly end for a great prophet, facing death at the whim of his enemy.

Wednesday 30 August

St Fiaccra, monk

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

It might seem strange to us, but one of the things the Thessalonians resented about Paul was his refusal to take money from them! In a way, he had insulted them, but he defends his motives with great energy.

Matthew 23:27-32

The attack on “show” religion continues fiercely. It is important to try to hear this both in the present and personally. It is

much easier to leave it in the past and think of others. The last line is unexpectedly robust!

Thursday 31 August

Saint Aidan, bishop and missionary, and the saints of Lindisfarne

1 Thessalonians 3:7-13

In our first reading today, Paul summarises his great love for the Christians in Thessalonica. It is a striking expression of real emotional dependence—something we might be uncomfortable with today. He brings this section to a conclusion with a prayer that God might allow him to visit them.

Matthew 24:42-51

In these days of “wokeness” the message should be clear!

Friday 1 September

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Ethical issues are always present. How should the Thessalonians behave, so as to distinguish themselves from the surrounding, much more lax culture? The general advice given then is still valuable today.

Matthew 25:1-13

Parables have focused meanings and so it is no use saying that the wise bridesmaids were lacking in Christian charity! The point lies elsewhere: for all our being in the Christian project together, there are still some things no one else can do for me. Faith must be *my faith*. Prayer must be *my prayer*. And so on.

Saturday 2 September

1 Thessalonians 4:9-11

In this short reading Paul affirms the Thessalonians before he exhorts them to even better behaviour. The topic—brotherly love—is never, ever out of date.

Matthew 25:14-30

Today’s parable is undoubtedly severe, especially towards the end. The overall message, however, stands: we have all receive graces and gifts—but how do we use them?