

Week 9 Reading: 16:13—18:35

Focal Text: 16:13—17:13

### A. Peter's Confession and the New Community (6:13-20)

In this scene Peter makes the confession that is central to the church's faith and Jesus pronounces Peter to be the foundation on which he will build his new community.

The theme of Jesus' identity has been woven into Matthew's story in various ways. Here, it comes to a climax. Matthew, in this scene, presents the establishment of a new community that recognizes Jesus' identity and will carry forward his work.

Davies and Allison note that Matthew's narrative here recalls the major themes developed in 2 Sam. 7:4-16 and 1 Chron. 17:3-15. In these OT texts it is promised that one of David's descendants will rule over Israel as king, that he will be God's son, that he will build a temple, and that his kingdom will last forever. Jesus is confessed as both Christ and Son of God; he builds a new temple (the church), and he gives to Peter the keys to the kingdom of Heaven. Jesus, then, is the fulfillment of these Davidic promises and themes.

Verses 13-14: In response to Jesus' question the disciples observe that Jesus has been identified with John the Baptist, with Elijah, with Jeremiah, and with "one of the prophets." The common denominator is the prophetic office. By drawing a comparison between Jesus and the great heroes of the past, Matthew shows that Jesus, while a prophet, is greater than the other prophets. He is not one in a series, but stands uniquely alone. As Matthew develops it, he is the realization of the messianic hopes of Judaism, the one who fulfills the Davidic promises, and brings to fulfillment/culmination God's redemptive plan by establishing a new (the eschatological) community.

Verses 15-16: Because Jesus has asked the disciples what they think, Peter, in his response, has been made out as their spokesman and representative. However, as Matthew tells the story, all the attention becomes focused on Peter.

This is the first confession of Jesus as Messiah (though the readers have known this from the beginning; 1:1, 16-18; 2:4; 11:1-2). All the disciples confessed Jesus to be the Son of God in 14:33. It is debated whether "Son of God" is employed here as a Messianic title (as it is used in the Psalms of the king of Israel) or whether it refers to the secret, personal relationship Jesus alone has with the Father referred to in 11:27.

Verse 17: Verses 17-19 are unique to Matthew's Gospel. Scholars debate whether this material was already in Matthew's sources or whether the writer added this himself. The majority of scholars do not regard these words as having originated with the historical Jesus.

In 13:16-17 it is important to note that all the disciples received a similar blessing. In some ways, Peter is representative of the disciples as a whole, and even represents the typical Christian, with all his strengths and weaknesses. Certainly, Matthew would want his readers to make a connection with Peter in their own individual discipleship to Jesus. And yet, too, Peter has a rather unique and unrepeatable role in the beginning of the new community Jesus founded.

The text points out that Peter did not come to this confession/spiritual insight through “flesh and blood”—in rabbinic texts this has the meaning of “human agency” in contrast to divine agency. Knowledge of Jesus’ unique role in God’s redemptive plan comes by revelation, not human intelligence.

Verse 18: Most scholars today take the position that the “rock” Jesus refers to is Peter himself, not his faith or his confession, suggesting that Peter did have a unique role in the beginning of the new community (not to be equated with a formal and continuing office). Pregeant, however, following some recent scholarly work on the text, makes a case for understanding the reference to be to Peter’s confession.

Jesus gives Simon a new name, (from here on in the narrative he will be known as Peter). This is in connection with Peter (or his confession of Christ) being the “Rock” on which Christ will build his church, the new community. Davies and Allison note parallels with the Genesis stories of Abraham and Jacob, two key OT persons given a new name by God. Particularly significant is that Abraham’s crucial function was to be the father of a new people, a special people through whom God would enter into covenant with and reveal his plan for the world. God is calling a new people into existence to serve God’s kingdom purpose on earth (see p. 269). The renaming of Peter signifies the opening of a new era; through him (and others like him who confess Christ and do his will) God brings a new people into being.

The image of “building” the church identifies the church as the new temple, in whom God’s presence dwells. The word church (also found in 18:17; the only two places where it is used in the Gospels) etymologically means “called out” and was used in Hellenistic Greek for the local political assembly (as in, e.g., Acts 19:32, 39, 40). By this term Matthew is referring to the renewed people of God, the new community constituted by the disciples, in contrast to corporate, unbelieving Israel. Keep in mind, though, that the new community is Jewish. The Jesus movement began as a Jewish reform movement within the Judaism of his time and remained primarily Jewish for some time, until by the Spirit of Christ they were led to break new ground and take the gospel to Samaritans and Gentiles. Jesus himself, initiated this direction in his earthly ministry. Though he understood his mission as one of reconstituting Israel (“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”—15:24) he laid the groundwork for a mission to the Gentiles, by extending healing grace to Gentiles and by showing that all are welcome at God’s table.

The “gates of Hades will not prevail against” the church, the new community. *Hades* refers to the realm of the dead in Greek mythology and corresponds to *Sheol* in Hebrew thought. The “gates of death” will not overcome the church. Davies and Allison, however, see another connection: “Readers should likely think of the end-time scenario, when the powers of the underworld will be unleashed from below, from the abyss, and rage against the saints; cf. Rev. 6:8; 11:7; 17:8” (p. 270).

Verse 19: Jesus gives to Peter “the keys to the kingdom of heaven” so that “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” The word directed to Peter alone (“you” is singular) is parallel in 18:18, where Jesus gives this power to the disciples collectively. Pregeant comments: “It would seem, then, that Peter’s acknowledgement is made on behalf of all the disciples and his leadership role is representative rather than strictly hierarchical and authoritarian” (p. 112).

The language of “binding and loosing” is rabbinic terminology for authoritative teaching, “for having the authority to interpret the Torah and apply it to particular cases, declaring what is permitted and what is not permitted” (Boring and Craddock, p. 70). Previously, Jesus gave the disciples the authority to proclaim the good news of the kingdom and to heal and cast out demons (10:1, 7-8). Now he gives them the authority to teach and apply the scriptures in ways that would greatly impact and shape the new community. The use of this image in 18:18 seems to infer that this will be the task, not just of Peter and the apostles, but the whole community, the church, though Peter is highlighted as being given special responsibility in this regard, as well as serving as representative and model.

Pregeant notes that Jesus gives the church leadership the authority “to make decisions about how the Jewish law, which in Matthew remains valid (5:17-20), is in practice to be interpreted.” This means, says Pregeant, that “faithfulness to the law is defined not in terms of a rigid literalism but as a dynamic and ongoing process of discovery—analogueous to that which was at work in rabbinic Judaism itself, despite the caricature of the Pharisees and scribes in Matthew” (p. 114). Pregeant, I think, is correct, but I would not limit this “dynamic and ongoing process” of interpretation and application to the Jewish law, but apply it to all of scripture. While the relationship between the Jewish Law and the new community is a lively question for Matthew’s church, their concern would encompass the entire Hebrew tradition.

This important task was intimated in 13:52: “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” The teachers of the church will draw from the old (the Hebrew scriptures and the rich Hebrew tradition) and apply it in fresh, new ways in light of the life, words, and deeds of Jesus. This is the work Matthew’s community was engaged in. Matthew’s Gospel represents the ongoing, interpretative work of the new

community as they reinterpret the old in light of the Christ Event. This faith community engaged in serious biblical interpretation and application. That they hadn't worked out all the tensions or the contradictions between the old and the new as is obvious from the tensions that surface in this Gospel.

Verse 20: Jesus commands them not to tell anyone about this revelation—that he is the Messiah. This anticipates the next scene where Peter completely misunderstands the nature of Jesus' Messiahship. If Peter and the group of disciples he represents misunderstands, then certainly the crowds that are following would not be able to understand. To announce his Messiahship to the people would do more harm than good.

#### B. Peter's Misunderstanding and the Cost and Promise of Discipleship (Matt. 16:21-28)

Verses 21-23: Matthew gives us quite a contrast: In the previous scene Peter is pronounced as "blessed" because of his confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. Here he is seen as an emissary of Satan, serving the enemy's cause, in his attempt to divert Jesus from his path leading to death. Jesus' rebuke recalls his rebuke of the devil in the temptation story (4:1-11).

Peter confesses Jesus as the Messiah, but he doesn't yet understand the kind of Messiah he is or rather he cannot imagine how Jesus' suffering and death would relate to his Messiahship. I'm sure, in common with beliefs popular within Judaism, that Peter expects the Messiah to bring worldly deliverance to Israel. There may be other important elements of belief as well, but the Messiah being rejected by the religious leadership and killed was not one of them; even though I'm sure Peter sensed the growing opposition from the religious authorities to Jesus' ministry.

Pregeant notes the "biting parody of the positive wordplay in the preceding scene that compared Peter to a rock on which the church is founded, he now calls him a 'stumbling block' or 'stone of stumbling'" (p. 126).

Despite Peter's revelation from God he continues to think with the conventional wisdom human beings are conditioned to think in. The contrast developed here goes beyond Peter: the way of God in this world comes by a revelation of Jesus Christ whereas the ordinary way of conventional wisdom comes by human beings thinking out of their own resources and categories as shaped by their culture.

The narrative of Peter's revelation and consequent rebuke signifies that startling revelations/insights from God does not make one immune to serious misunderstanding and failure. Despite this lapse and blunder, Peter is one of the three given the privilege of being with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. Instead of being punished for taking

sides with the evil one in tempting Jesus to forsake the way that leads to the cross, Peter is given a glimpse of the glorified Christ, where, as we shall see, once again his speech reflects his misunderstanding. We may see in this God's commitment to our spiritual growth.

In v. 21 Matthew uses the word "must" in referring to Jesus' death. According to Davies and Allison this "is the functional equivalent of 'it is written'" and expresses the belief that Jesus' death "is the realization in time of a destiny stored up and dictated to the Messiah by the Scriptures, which convey God's will" (p. 272). See especially Ps. 22 and Isa. 52-53. But this certainly does not mean that Jesus' fate was inevitable. Throughout the narrative he is the one who chooses his destiny.

Verses 24-26: These words get at the essential nature of discipleship. Boring and Craddock comment: "The scandalous disclosure of a crucified Messiah is joined to the shocking revelation that disciples must share Jesus' cross" (p. 146). And what a shock! Israel's Messiah is going to be humiliated, rejected, and crucified as a common criminal (which is what the "cross" signified in that context—Roman execution by crucifixion, the most severe punishment that could be given). But then, he says, "if you want to be my followers, then you must get in line behind me carrying your cross to the place of execution." Jesus was going to bear the hate and animosity of the political and religious establishment even unto death; he is telling his followers that they must be willing to bear it too.

For Matthew's readers this would be understood metaphorically. It might mean literal death; it might not. It certainly signifies: (1) a willingness to bear the hate and enmity of those who stand against God's kingdom of love and justice, and (2) death to ego, to selfish ambition and self-centeredness, that makes self the center of the universe.

The first two verbs—"deny" and "take up"—are past tense, while the third, "follow" is present tense. This suggests that "the decision to renounce self and take up one's cross stands at the beginning of the disciple's journey and is then followed by a continued determination to stick to the chosen path" (Davies and Allison, p. 275).

Verse 25 elucidates v. 24. By dying to self (ego) one finds real life, life in God's kingdom. Those "who want to save their life" by indulging their ego, by living for their own selfish ambitions and interests, will "lose it." They will miss true, authentic life that flourishes in God's kingdom. But those "who lose their life for my sake"—those who give up their own selfish agenda to live for Christ's cause in the world—will experience real, authentic life, life as God meant it to be.

There is no profit in having every selfish desire fulfilled if in the end one misses out on life in God's kingdom (v. 26). Nothing can compare with life in God's kingdom. Jesus said

earlier that the least in the kingdom of heaven have a greater destiny to fulfill than John the Baptist (11:11). There is no profit in gaining the wealth and pleasure of the world, if one misses life in God's kingdom.

Disciples of Jesus are not passive spectators who watch as the drama unfolds; they live the drama. Jesus is no mere substitute who dies for them so they won't have to die; he is their leader who goes before them on a way that leads to suffering and death and expects them to follow. He does not say, "Believe this about me," but rather, "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." Discipleship is not about getting the information right or assenting to a set of propositions; it's about doing the will of God and living in obedience to Christ, which involves dying to one's self-will: "Not as I will, but as you will."

Verses 27-28: This is best read as a promise rather than a threat. God's kingdom turns the world upside down. Those who are persecuted now and suffer will receive their reward (see 5:11-12). The reference "in the glory of his Father" gains illumination from the scene that follows, where the appearance of Jesus is bathed in a glory that anticipates the glory of his God's future kingdom.

There is always some tension between salvation as a gift and judgment according to works ("he will repay everyone for what has been done"; see Rom. 2:6 and 2 Cor. 5:10—Paul, too, known for his emphasis on God's gift of salvation saw no contradiction with a judgment according to what one has done). F. D. Brunner translates: "at that time he will award every single individual according to his or her behavior"—noting that "behavior" translates the Greek word *praxis*, which is in the singular, not the plural, thus viewing the person's life "as a single whole rather than as isolated acts . . . this text instructs us that our lives are seen by the Judge, not so much as a series of incidents but as a unity, and it is this *whole*, this *life*, this '*behavior*' that will be awarded" (p. 160).

Brunner translates v. 27, "the Son of Man is just about to come"—which suggests very soon. Add to this the statement in v. 28: "there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom"—and it would seem that either Jesus himself or the early church (or both more likely) believed that the kingdom would come soon. The reference to Jesus' coming, in the actual historical context of his life, is probably a reference to his vindication/resurrection. The "coming" then, in the original setting of Jesus, does not mean "second coming," but "the unveiling or manifesting of his presence." If Jesus said something like this in his historical ministry he was most likely referring to his vindication/resurrection after his death, which he equated with the full arrival of God's kingdom.

For Matthew's church and those reading Matthew's gospel it would have a broader meaning. It would still refer to Jesus' vindication/resurrection, but would also point forward to the time when Christ's presence would be manifest in the fullness of God's

kingdom on earth. The reader would also see an anticipation of this in the scene that follows in Matthew's narrative—the Transfiguration, where Jesus momentarily manifests God's glory before three of the disciples.

This creative way of interpreting the text is suggested by Matthew's placement of this statement right before the Transfiguration. It also prompts us to “see” the presence of Christ in other events and experiences—through which we get glimpses of the glory to come.

### C. The Transfiguration (17:1-13)

This story recounts Exodus 24 and 34, which tell of Moses transfiguration on Mount Sinai. There are several parallels. Both take place on a mountain. On the seventh day God calls to Moses out of the cloud (Ex. 24:16); Jesus is transfigured “six days later” (17:1). A divine voice speaks from a bright cloud when Jesus is transfigured; the same thing happens in Exodus 24:15-18 and 34:5. The parallel, however, is not one of equals. As in 12:41-42 where Jesus is greater than Jonah and Solomon, a greater than Moses is here.

Verses 1-8: All the focus in the story is on Jesus. Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus, suggesting that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. Peter's remark seems to put Jesus on the level of Moses and Elijah: “I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” God interrupts. While Peter is still speaking (implying a kind of rebuke) God manifests his presence in a cloud and speaks: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” The words of affirmation given to Jesus alone at his baptism, is now given to Peter, James and John as well. The Divine Voice draws all eyes and ears to Christ. Jesus is God's eschatological prophet (see Deut. 18:15, 18), like unto Moses, but greater than Moses. Jesus is God's mouthpiece heralding God's salvation. To emphasize this and draw all attention to Jesus the Divine Voice says, “Listen to him!” Moses and Elijah disappear, and “when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus alone”—the one greater than Moses and Elijah, the one who rightly interprets and fulfills the Law and the Prophets.

F. D. Bruner comments: “God's authoritative ‘Listen to him!’ requires Christians to read the OT with their Jesus glasses on, interpreting the OT's words in the light of Jesus' deeds, teaching, and emphasis” (p. 175). Jesus is the key to the interpretation and application of scripture. Bruner contends that the gospel of Jesus is the norm that must guide all interpretation—“this gospel of Scripture imposes itself from Scripture as the final norm over Scripture. The gospel is the canon within the canon” (p. 175).

In v. 6 Matthew describes the reaction of the disciples in terms of an OT theophany story, where those who experience the revelation of God are struck with fear. Here, Jesus immediately comes to them, touches them and says, “Get up and do not be afraid” (v. 7).

Schweizer points out that the verb “get up” is used just this way when Jesus heals (8:15) and when he raises the dead (9:25); that only here and at 28:18, when Jesus appears to his disciples, do we read of Jesus “coming” to them. Perhaps the meaning that is conveyed by Matthew is that Jesus is the Lord who brings healing and life to those who live in fear of death. Schweizer comments, “Probably Matthew is trying to depict by anticipation what will one day happen to the disciple when his Lord comes to him as the risen Christ and restores him to life” (p. 350). F. D. Bruner writes, “In a way, the entire gospel is present in this verse [v. 7], for the church believes that God himself ‘came up to us, gripped us, and told us to get up on our feet and not be afraid anymore’ in the coming of the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth” (p. 179).

Verses 9-13: In the conversation coming down the mountain the three disciples who have witnessed the event are instructed to tell no one until after the resurrection, the event that the transfiguration foreshadowed (see 16:28). They inquire as to why some of the scribes teach that Elijah must appear before the kingdom of God can come. Jesus uses this opportunity to make a connection between John the Baptist and Elijah (see 11:14): John fulfills the role of Elijah—“Elijah is indeed coming . . . but I tell you that Elijah has already come.” While John himself denied that he was Elijah (Jn. 1:21), Jesus makes the connection. John ministered in the spirit and power of Elijah.

By referencing John’s death—“they (the powers that be) did to him whatever they pleased”—Jesus anticipates his own death—“also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.”

Matthew has weaved together a unique tapestry of the death and resurrection of Jesus. In 16:21 Jesus foretells his suffering, death and resurrection. The interchange between Peter and Jesus that follows which emphasizes his suffering and death provides the backdrop for Jesus’ call for his disciples to follow him along the same path. Disciples must die to self/ego in humility, vulnerability and surrender to God’s will, even if it leads to death.

Next, the promise of reward for faithfulness turns the focus on Jesus’ vindication/resurrection. This epiphany (the transfiguration of Jesus) on the mountain top is a foreshadowing of the vindication/resurrection/glorification of Jesus.

The Divine Voice that affirms His Beloved Son brings together Ps. 2:7, an enthronement psalm pointing to Jesus’ vindication/resurrection, and Isa. 42:1, linking Jesus to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. Thus the Voice, affirming Jesus as God’s Beloved Son, brings together allusions to both his suffering and resurrection.

Then, in the discussion on the way down the mountain the focus turns back to Jesus’ suffering and death.

Davies and Allison point out how the transfiguration is a kind of dark twin to the account of the crucifixion: “In the one case Jesus is elevated on a mountain, in the other he is elevated on a cross. In the one case there is a private epiphany, in the other there is a public spectacle. In the one case Jesus is transfigured in light, in the other case a supernatural darkness descends. In the one case Jesus’ garments are illumined, in the other they are stripped off. In the one case Jesus is glorified, in the other he is shamed. In the one case Elijah appears, in the other case Elijah does not appear. In the one case two saints appear beside Jesus (Moses and Elijah), in the other two criminals hang beside him. In the one case God confesses Jesus, in the other God abandons Jesus. In the one case a divine voice declares Jesus to be God’s Son, in the other a pagan soldier makes this confession. In the one case there is reverent prostration before Jesus, in the other the onlookers mock Jesus with prostration . . . Together the two scenes interestingly illustrate the extremities of human experience. One is spit and mockery, nails and nakedness, blood and loneliness, torture and death. The other makes visible the presence of God and depicts the divinization of human nature. So Jesus embodies the gamut of human possibilities; he is the coincidence of opposites. Perhaps this is one of the reasons the canonical Jesus has always been so attractive and inspiring. He shows forth in his own person both the depths of pain and anguish which human beings have known, as well as that which all long for—transfiguration into some state beyond such pain and anguish. Jesus is the paradigm of both despair and hope; he is humanity debased and humanity glorified” (p. 284).

Pregeant makes the observation that the Transfiguration story reveals a process of growing and maturing understanding on the part of the disciples (p. 129). In the experience itself, Matthew says “that when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.” This implies their understanding of the superiority of Jesus as one greater than Moses and Elijah. Then on the way down the mountain they understand the connection between John and Elijah after Jesus instructs them. Matthew closes the story with: “Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.”

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. A central theme in this narrative beginning with Peter’s confession is the uniqueness of Jesus to God’s redemptive plan. Jesus is presented as the ultimate revelation of God and as superior to all other persons God has used to accomplish his will. Is it possible to believe this about Jesus and still believe that people of other religious faiths who do not have this kind of faith in Jesus can know God? And if we confess this about Jesus (which of course we do) how is it possible to dialogue with people of other religious faiths as fellow pilgrims affording them mutual respect?
2. In following Peter throughout this part of the narrative what connections do you make with him? Can you see yourself in some of his actions and responses?

3. Matthew's church, the faith community out of which this Gospel emerged and to whom it was written, gave special attention to the interpretation and application of scripture. They critically engaged scripture in a process of ongoing interpretation in order hear what the living Christ was saying to them. How important do you think it is for a church to be involved in the ongoing process of interpretation and application of scripture?
4. What are some fundamental differences/contrasts between the conventional human way of thinking and Christ's way of thinking?
5. In your own words, based on Jesus' discussion of discipleship in this passage, describe what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?
6. How might we train or prepare ourselves to "see" (discern, experience, know) the glory of God's presence more often?
7. What does Bruner mean when he contends that Christians must read scripture with their "Jesus glasses on"? What does he mean when he says that "the gospel (of Jesus) is the canon within the canon" of scripture?
8. What does Davies and Allison mean when they say that Jesus is "the coincidence of opposites"?