

Sermon

Who Is This Man?

Matthew 16:13-30

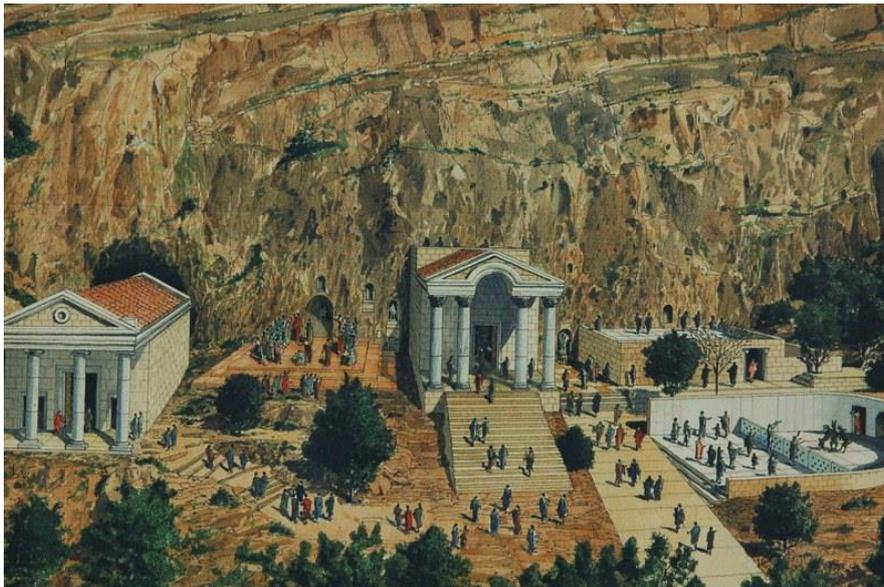
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“Whad are ya?!” is NOT a phrase that we will find on the lips of Jesus, but it could possibly be heard on the lips of the Pharisees. Who is this man that the disciples have been following? They have heard His teaching; they have seen His wonderful miracles. What conclusion have they come to in the light of all their experience? A very great deal hangs on the answer to that question. It did then. It does now.

In our day and age this passage is one of the most offensive in the New Testament, let me show you why and then we will come back to our answer to the question Jesus puts to His disciples.

The setting Jesus chose for this question is loaded with meaning. Lorraine and I have been privileged to go there and have seen it for ourselves. Every other site we went to had crowds of people milling around. Caesarea Philippi by contrast had only a few. Yet here one of the most important events happened in the most dramatic setting.



The above picture is an artist's impression of what the site looked like in Jesus' day and clearly shows the number of temples there.

Each of the first three Gospels give the same setting for the question that Jesus asks His disciples. Would you close your eyes and try to picture the scene I will describe. Here is how one commentator describes it:

“Here then is a dramatic picture. Here is a homeless, penniless Galilean carpenter, with twelve ordinary men around Him. At the moment the orthodox people of His day are plotting and planning to eliminate and destroy Him as a dangerous heretic. He stands in an area littered with temples of the Syrian gods; in a place where the ancient Greek gods looked down; in a place where the history of Israel crowded in on the minds of people; where the white marble

splendour of the home of Caesar-worship dominated the landscape and compelled the eye. And there- of all places- this amazing carpenter stands and asks His followers who they believe Him to be, and expects the answer, the Messiah, the son of the living God. It is as if Jesus deliberately set Himself against the background of the world's religions in all their history and splendour, and demanded to be compared with them, and to have the verdict given in His favour.”¹

Please be very clear on this. The words, “You are the Christ, the son of the living God”, are not the words of Peter Lloyd. These are the words of the Gospels and all the writers of the New Testament. These are the words of the great creeds of the Church universal. These are the words of the great thinkers of the Church down through the ages. The whole weight of Gospel and history comes in support of the truth of this declaration.

None the less there have always been dissenters. The New Testament itself declares this. But from the 17th Century, philosophers and, sadly, some theologians, began to raise questions about the truth of this, until, in the present day, we are told there is no such thing as religious truth. There is only opinion. All religions are the same. All are more or less wrong. Certainty of religious belief is not possible. The New Testament is not historically reliable. All that we can say of it is that we have the writings of good Christian people telling us what they now believed many years after the events they purport to describe.

Not everyone believed this. There were Godly people with solid academic qualifications who argued strongly against the prevailing view. There is solid academic ground for you to stand on if you trust the Bible as a reliable witness to our Lord's life, teaching, death and resurrection.

Our daughter attended some Biblical studies lectures at Auckland University. The attitude of one of the lecturers towards the Bible was pretty much as I have described it above. When she started to study Classics, she was surprised to find that her lecturers there used the Old Testament as a reliable witness to the history of its time. Things are beginning to change!

What I want to say to you today, is that when you are reading the Bible you can believe without intellectual shame that it is a reliable witness to the events and teaching that it gives.

That does not mean that it is problem free. There are still many questions of history where our current state of knowledge is inadequate to provide us with an answer. There are still some data that appear to contradict the Bible. Please do not imagine that you can leave your brain at the door when you walk into the Church. Equally do not be afraid of questions or of the people who ask them. Always remember to treat “with respect” those who are asking questions, especially if they are children or young people.

I have taken this long excursus to highlight the fact that when you come to read your Bible, you can do so in full confidence of its truth.

Which brings us back to the question Jesus asked and the answer that Peter gave on behalf of all the Apostles. There are at least three possible answers:

1. The New Testament writers were looking backwards to Jesus with rose coloured spectacles and painting a picture of Him. We are not reading history; we are reading human musings that try to explain their mystical experiences.
2. Jesus is one among many outstanding religious leaders that the world has known. He is no less than nor greater than that.
3. The living God has fulfilled His promises to His people in a way they did not expect and visited this planet in the person of Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah who is also His Son. Because of this we may know who God is, what kind of person God is and that God desires a relationship with us.

What do you say to the risen Lord Jesus when He asks you, “Who do YOU say I am?”

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¹ Barclay. Commentary on Matthew Vol 2 Page 149