



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

Who Do You Say That I Am?

Sunday 23rd August 2026

Readings: Romans 12:1-8 and Matthew 16:13-20

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Today's gospel from Matthew begins with a conversation.

Jesus and his disciples are together, and Jesus asks them what people have been saying about him.

The disciples are ready with their answers. Everyone seems to have an opinion. Some think he's John the Baptist. Others say Elijah. Others think he's one of the prophets. Then Jesus asks a different question:

'But who do you say I am?'

I imagine there must have been a bit of a pause. It's much easier to talk about what everyone else thinks than to answer for ourselves. And yet, nearly two thousand years later, it's still the question at the heart of the Christian faith.

Not what does the person sitting next to me think. Not what did my parents believe. Not simply what the Church teaches. But who do I say Jesus is?

Whether we've been following Jesus for many years or are still finding our way, that's a question to keep coming back to.

Because being a Christian isn't first and foremost about belonging to an institution, following a set of rules, or even holding the right opinions. It's about relationship with a person.

Before Jesus talks about what the disciples will do, before he speaks about the future, he asks them who they believe him to be.

And perhaps that's because everything flows from there. How we live. How we treat others. What gives us hope. How we face times of uncertainty, change or loss. All of it is shaped by our answer to that question:

"Who do you say that I am?"

Peter's answer is about to become a turning point in the story. But as we'll see recognising who Jesus is doesn't mean Peter suddenly has everything worked out. In many ways it's only the beginning of the journey.

Peter answers:

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God"

It's a remarkable moment.

Up until now, lots of people have been trying to work Jesus out. They've seen the miracles. They've heard the teaching. They've watched crowds gather around him. But most people are still trying to fit Jesus into categories they already understand.

He's a prophet. He's another Elijah. He's another John the Baptist. In other words, they think Jesus is important, but they haven't quite grasped who he really is.

Peter sees something more.

Not perfectly as we will soon discover, but enough to recognise that Jesus is not simply another teacher sent by God. He is the Messiah himself. And that's often how faith works.

We sometimes imagine faith means having all the answers. We think mature Christians are people who have worked everything out and never have any doubts or questions. But Peter reminds us that faith is something different.

Peter doesn't suddenly become an expert. In fact, if we keep reading Matthew's Gospel, it doesn't take long before Peter is getting things wrong again. He can be courageous one minute and confused the next. He can speak with great insight and then completely misunderstand what Jesus is saying.

I find that strangely encouraging. Because most of us know what that feels like.

There are moments when God seems close and faith feels clear. There are other times when questions come more easily than answers. There are times when we feel confident about following Christ and times when we feel less sure of the next step.

Yet Jesus doesn't dismiss Peter because his understanding is incomplete. Instead, he blesses him. Jesus recognises that Peter has seen enough to take the next step.

And perhaps that's worth remembering. The life of faith isn't about understanding everything before we begin. It's about responding to what we have seen and discovered of Christ so far and trusting him with the rest.

Peter doesn't have the whole picture, but he has enough to say:

"You are the Messiah"

And sometimes this is where discipleship begins – not with certainty about everything but with a willingness to trust the One standing before us.

So, Peter has just made this extraordinary declaration of faith "You are the Messiah, the Living Son of God" and Jesus responds by blessing him. Then the conversation takes an unexpected turn. Peter has been talking about who Jesus is. Suddenly Jesus starts talking about who Peter is

"You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my Church."

It's as though Peter answers one question and Jesus answers another.

Peter answers "This is who you are" and Jesus replies "This is who you are becoming" I think that's how God often works in our lives.

We can sometimes imagine faith is mainly about learning things about God, understanding more about the Bible, getting our theology right. Those things matter of course. But faith is about more than knowing facts about Jesus. It's about being changed by him.

Again and again in the gospels, people encounter Jesus and discover that they don't walk away unchanged. Zacchaeus becomes more generous. Mary Magdalene finds freedom and hope. The disciples become courageous enough to leave familiar things behind and follow a different path.

Meeting Jesus changes people. And that change isn't about becoming someone completely different. It's about becoming the person God created us to be. Peter is a wonderful example of that.

When Jesus first meets Peter he is impulsive, enthusiastic, sometimes brave and sometimes reckless. None of that disappears overnight. Peter remains very much himself. He will still make mistakes. He will still misunderstand Jesus. He will still have moments of failure.

Yet Jesus sees in him something Peter cannot yet see in himself. Not simply the fisherman he is but the disciple he can become. Not simply his weaknesses but his potential. Not simply his past but his future.

And perhaps that's good news for all of us. Because most of us are very aware of our limitations. We know our mistakes. We know the things we wish we had done differently. We know the parts of ourselves that still need God's grace.

Yet Christ looks at each of us with the same loving vision he showed Peter. He sees us as we are, but he also sees what we might become through his grace. The Christian life is not about creating a new identity for ourselves. It's about discovering our life in Christ.

And perhaps that is why the question "Who do you say that I am?" matters so much. Because the more clearly we see Christ, the more clearly we understand what it means to follow him.

If Jesus sees in Peter not just who he is, but who he is becoming, the obvious question is: what does that transformation actually look like?

Paul begins his letter to the Romans with a striking invitation:

"Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."

The transformation Paul describes is not about appearances, it's about God reshaping the way we see, think and live.

We often imagine transformation should be dramatic. Yet more often God's work is quiet and persistent. We learn patience. We learn generosity. We learn forgiveness. We become less concerned with ourselves and more attentive to the needs of others.

Paul goes onto say:

"Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think."

This isn't a call to put ourselves down. It's an invitation to humility and to recognise that everything we have is a gift from God.

And then Paul paints a picture of a community where everyone has something to contribute. Some teach. Some lead. Some encourage. Some serve. Some show compassion. These are not spectacular gifts. They are ordinary ways God's grace is made visible in everyday life.

In many ways it is a picture of the Church at its best. Not a gathering of people who have all the answers, but a community of people who are being changed by God's grace and learning how to offer their lives in service to others.

And perhaps that is what transformation looks like. A life centred not on self, but on Christ. Not on status, but on service. Not on standing out from others, but on belonging to the body of Christ and helping others to flourish alongside us.

What is striking in both today's readings is that neither Jesus nor Paul is interested in isolated disciples. Jesus says:

"On this rock I will build my Church"

And Paul reminds us that: "We who are many, are one body in Christ" Faith is personal but it is never private.

Every part of the body matters. Each part has a different role. No one part can do everything and no one part can say to another "I don't need you." That is true of the Church today just as much as it was in Paul's day.

Across our Diocese there are churches in cities, towns and villages. Some are large and some are small. Some worship with choirs and organs. Others gather in school halls, community centres or cafes. They don't all look the same. Yet they all belong to Christ.

Within every congregation there are different gifts and experiences. Some lead from the front and others serve quietly behind the scenes. Some find faith easy and others struggle. Yet together we form the body of Christ. Perhaps that is one of the great gifts of the Church. We are reminded that we do not follow Jesus alone. We encourage one another when faith feels difficult. We pray for one another when life is painful. We celebrate with one another in times of joy. And together we bear witness to Christ in our communities.

The transformation Paul describes is therefore not simply about what happens within each one of us as individuals. It is also about what happens among us. As Christ changes us, he also shapes us into a people who reflect something of his love, grace and hope to the world around us.

And in a world that often feels divided, fragmented and uncertain, that shared life matters more than ever. For the Church is at its best when people encounter not just a set of beliefs, but a community being steadily transformed by the presence of Christ in its midst.

At the beginning of today's gospel Jesus asks the disciples a question:

"Who do you say that I am?"

What strikes me is that Jesus never finished with Peter. Peter's confession was not the end of the story it was the beginning. There would be more lessons to learn, more mistakes to make, more questions to wrestle with, more opportunities to grow in faith and trust.

The same is true for us. None of us has arrived. All of us are still learning what it means to follow Christ. All of us are still being shaped into the people God is calling us to become. And perhaps that is the invitation in these readings. To keep our eyes fixed on Christ. To keep allowing him to shape our lives. To trust that he sees in us more than we can often see in ourselves.

And to remember that we do not make that journey alone. We travel together as the body of Christ, encouraging one another, serving one another and bearing witness to God's love in the communities where he has placed us.

As we reflect today, perhaps Jesus asks each of us the same question he asked Peter:

"Who do you say that I am?"

And perhaps our answer is found not only in the words that we speak, but in the lives that we live. Lives that are being transformed by his grace. Lives that point others towards him. Lives that reveal something of his love, his hope and his kingdom.

May we know Christ more clearly, follow him more faithfully, and become, day by day, the people he created us to be. Amen.