



Who Do You Say That I Am?
Rev Amanda Mark
Year A, 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 16: 13-20
Sunday 23 August 2026

In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life. Amen.

Every few months a new billboard appears outside on the corner of Wellesley and Hobson Streets. Sometimes people love them. Sometimes people hate them. Sometimes they make the news. But every one of them is trying to answer a question.

All the billboards are trying to say something about who we are. And beneath that they respond to the question: What do we believe about God?

That is where today's gospel begins.

Jesus asks his disciples:

"Who do people say that I am?"

The answers come quickly enough. Some say John the Baptist. Some say Elijah. Some say Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Then Jesus turns the question from the general to the personal:

"But who do you say that I am?"

Who do we say God is?

The question is not what we learned as children, not what our parents believed, not what other Christians believe. The question is who do we say God is?

For many of us, our image of God changes over the course of our lives. Life changes us. Joy changes us. Loss changes us. Disappointment changes us. Love changes us.

And as we change, our experience of God changes too. We notice God in places and people we had not noticed before. We encounter God in new ways.

And in today's gospel Peter reaches one of those moments. *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."* For Peter, "Messiah" was not simply a title. It was an expression of what he had experienced. In Jesus he had encountered compassion, healing, inclusion and hope. He had seen something of God's presence and purpose at work. And so, he says, *"You are the Messiah."*

And it is Peter's experience that matters here. Because Jesus' response is immediate. Jesus says to Peter: *"You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church."* For centuries Christians have debated exactly what Jesus meant. Was Peter himself the rock? Was his leadership the rock? Was this the beginning of a line of authority within the church?

But perhaps there is another way of hearing these words. Notice what has happened. Before Jesus says anything about the rock, Peter has recognised something. Something has shifted for him.

Out of Peter's experience comes his declaration: *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."* And maybe that is the rock. Not Peter himself. After all, Peter is courageous one moment and fearful the next. He understands Jesus one day and misunderstands him the next. Before long he will deny even knowing him. Peter is a disciple in progress, just like the rest of us.

What's solid in all of this is the experience beneath those words. An encounter with the living God. A recognition that in Jesus he has glimpsed something true about God and something true about life.

The church is built on that same experience. On people encountering God and finding their lives changed by that encounter.

The rock is not certainty. The rock is encounter. The rock is our experience of the living God revealed in Christ.

And that should be encouraging. Because let's face it, if the church depended upon perfect doctrine or flawless leaders, it would never have survived its first generation.

But if it is built upon humanity's continuing experience of the living God encountered in Christ, then there is hope for all of us. There is room for growth and change, for movement towards God, for binding and loosing.

This raises a second question. How do we come to know who God is? Jesus says to Peter: *"Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you."* Some truths cannot simply be worked out. They are encountered. They are experienced. They are revealed. We come to know God through living, through the experiences that shape us, challenge us and change us. And through those experiences we know God's presence in our lives.

And that takes the conversation in an interesting direction.

Jesus has asked Peter who Jesus is. Now Jesus tells Peter who Peter is. *"You are Peter."* It's an interesting turn in the conversation. A discussion about the identity of Jesus suddenly becomes a discussion about the identity of Peter. The two seem to be connected.

And then Jesus says: *"Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* If the rock is the experience of God revealed in Christ, then binding and loosing are what flow

from that experience. The way we understand God is not merely an intellectual exercise. It shapes our choices, our communities, and our world.

Once we encounter God, the question becomes: what follows from that recognition? What kind of world follows from that experience?

And that brings us back to St Matthew's.

If our experience of God is the rock upon which the church is built, then everything else flows from that foundation. Our worship. Our welcome. Our engagement with the community. Our concern for justice. Our public voice.

None of these things are the foundation of the church. They are the visible expression of the foundation. They are ways of making visible our experience of God in Christ.

So, when our billboards demand that the hungry are fed, call for the genocide in Palestine to stop, welcome "two of every kind", or declare that we don't care what's in your pants, we are saying something about who God is.

We are giving public expression to our experience of God and to the God we encounter in Jesus. A God who seeks justice. A God who honours human dignity. A God who is present in the world.

Peter answered Jesus' question:

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

We answer the same question every day. In our worship. In our welcome. In our public life. In the community we build.

At our best, we make visible here in the heart of Auckland the God whom Peter encountered in Jesus. A God of love. A God of justice. A God of welcome.

Amen.