

Who do people say that the Son of Man is?

Matt 16:13-20

Trinity XII, 23rd August 2026

Who do people say that the Son of Man is? Asked Jesus.

We'll come back in a moment to why exactly he said Son of Man, and not just, who do people say that I am. More of that in a moment.

First though stop and consider that this is the question he thinks is really important. Do you know who I am?

Not, do you agree with my teaching? Do you think I've got some wonderful ideas? Do you view me as a splendid moral example? No. Who do you say that I am?

A big part of being Christian – we might almost say the foundation, the rock – of being Christian is giving the right answer to that question. It's not your values. It's not your good life. It's not your spirituality. All those are great, really great. But who do you say that I am? Hear that question addressed to each of us this morning.

And there are four answers in the passage, each of them calling for a bit of attention.

Who do the crowds say that he is? Well, said the disciples, some say Elijah; some say John the Baptist, or Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets. All great figures from the Bible, from Jewish history. Maybe Jesus was in some sense them reincarnated, back from the dead. Now that would obviously be in some ways very remarkable indeed – back from the dead! – but in another way, it makes Jesus literally nothing we haven't seen before. There's a kind of template into which he fits.

It's just like if we were to ask a bunch of random people today who they thought Jesus was. They probably wouldn't say Elijah or Jeremiah back from the dead, but they might very well say: oh, a great spiritual teacher. The founder of a religion. A moral hero. A human rights activist. A bit like Gandhi. Nothing, really, that we haven't seen before.

That's the first answer. There's three others in the passage, each a bit richer than the first one, and the last one being the one where Jesus says yes, that's right, that's it, that's who I am. Let's go through them quickly.

So, first answer – He's nothing we haven't seen before.

Second answer – the Son of Man. Who do people say that *the Son of Man* is? Son of Man looks like it was one of Jesus' favourite ways of talking about himself. It doesn't appear anywhere else in the New Testament, not in the letters of Paul or Peter or Hebrews or anywhere else, but it's all over the place in the Gospels, on the lips of Jesus. Son of Man. And it's not really very clear what it means. Nobody else was using it at the time, certainly not as any kind of title for a figure they were waiting for. In fact, some scholars think it's just a slightly elaborate way of saying 'me'. That's a fairly minority view though. Most would say go and read Daniel 7, a text which looks like it was pretty central for Jesus. It speaks of 'one like a son of man', surrounded by terrifying and violent beasts, and yet who is exalted by God over them, who receives glory and honour and power. For Daniel, that was a way of talking about Israel; it looks like Jesus made it about Himself. He's the one who will live out Israel's destiny, who will conquer the beasts, and be crowned by God.

Which means it is closely linked to the third answer in our present passage to that question, who do you say that I am? You are the Messiah, says Peter. Messiah. The anointed one. In Hebrew *Meshiach*; in Greek, *Christos* – which is how we get Jesus Christ. Christ, at the risk of teaching you all to suck eggs, is not Jesus' surname. Joseph and Mary were not Mr and Mrs Christ. No, it's Jesus *the* Christ, Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the anointed one. Anointed as King. The Messiah is the one who is going to deliver his people, to liberate them from all that enslaves them – be that an empire, be that sin – and establish just and righteous rule over them.

And that's Jesus. He accepts the title Messiah. He praises Peter for it. But straight away, the reading says, 'he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone.' You're right, but no more. You're right, but for now, just keep quiet. Why? How to explain that? Well, the most obvious answer – and we'll see more of this next week – is that whilst Peter saw truly that Jesus was Messiah, he had no idea at all about *how* Jesus would be Messiah. Most

people, when they thought Messiah, thought kings and white horses and armies and power. Kick the Romans out; sort out the wicked, and both by any means necessary. And Jesus is saying, hold on. You're right that I'm Messiah. But you don't know what that means. You don't know how it works. And if you go around shouting Messiah now, you'll get it more wrong than right.

Who is Jesus? Nothing we haven't seen before: no, not quite right. Son of Man – getting warmer. Messiah – warmer still.

And then the best, fullest, richest answer: the Son of the Living God. The Son of the Living God. That hits the jackpot. That's where Jesus says, Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah! Flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in Heaven. Son of the Living God.

What does it mean to call Jesus Son of God? Well, more than people first realized. It's a bit like Messiah, actually: it's a term that people *thought* they knew what it meant, but in Jesus it kind of takes on a life of its own, and grows beyond their control, and they come to see it means more than they had ever thought possible. So, at the beginning, it's possible that someone might have called Jesus Son of God and just meant, well, here's a person highly favoured by God. Here's a person specially endorsed, or promoted by God. It was a way sometimes, of talking about the king of Israel, or indeed the nation itself. This person, this country, is special, exalted, royal.

The story of early Christianity is about realizing that that's not enough. Jesus is a bit more than someone exalted by God, a man favoured by God. No - and they begin to realise this from the very beginning - something greater than that is here. Listen to what He says: your sins are forgiven. Not, may God forgive you – your sins *are* forgiven. Moses said to you an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. I say to you, love your enemy. *I say* – and I matter more than Moses. What kind of 'I' gets to say that? Who *is* this man? That's what the disciples are asking themselves, and then they put that together with what He does. He feeds the thousands in the wilderness. He heals the sick, raises the dead; he tells the storm to be still, and it does. *It does*. Who is this, that even the winds and waves obey him, they say? What kind of 'I' does that?

And the answer, grasped almost instantly, but worked out over centuries, was: well, not just any old I. Not just another human being. Not something we've seen before. No, Jesus Christ was God made human. As the carol puts it, he came down from earth to heaven, who was Lord and God of all. Lord and God of all. Jesus. But He also prayed, to someone He called Father, who was still in Heaven. You had God on earth, speaking to God in Heaven. Both God, both really God – as the Creed would later put it, of one being – and yet not the same. Really God, but really two. Talking to each other, loving each other. One sending, One sent. One Father, One Son. Not just any old I, not something we've seen before, but someone who changes our very understanding of who God is, of what that word even means.

Everything stems from that. That is the foundation of Christianity. Not our values, not our rituals, not our moral teaching – no. This fact that He came down to earth from heaven, who is Lord and God of all. God made human. Blessed are you because you've seen that Simon son of Jonah, says Jesus. On this, everything depends. I'm not just a teacher, not just a prophet, not just a good example: I'm God, come to save you. Come to die for you, come to rise again, come to bring you all back home. That's the Gospel. To the incarnate God be praise and glory forever and ever. Amen.