

Confession of St. Peter—Matthew 16:13-20

“Father, may these *spoken* words be faithful to the *written* word and lead us to the *living* word, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

I am one of the many people who went back to school after a long gap. Beginning study at Drew Theological Seminary brought certain surprises. In my New Testament class, we were asked to write a paper on what each of the New Testament writers thought of Jesus. What did Matthew think? What did Mark think? What did Paul think? And so on. That seemed a fair enough and useful assignment. But then came the shock. What did we think? What did we think of Matthew’s view of Jesus? What did we think of what Paul has to say about Jesus? Well, if you are young, such an assignment may seem normal, but I date from the era when we are not allowed to use the word “I” on a college paper. It was not what we thought that mattered; it was what scholars thought. In the years that I had been away from school, the primacy of “objectivity” had given way to the post-modern approach, which recognizes that there is no such thing as absolute objectivity. Each of us sees truth through our own lens.

When Jesus asked the disciples “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” I imagine that wasn’t a very hard question. Jesus seemed to be saying, “You fellows have been milling around amongst the people. What are you picking up? What do you hear on the street?” The disciples answered with ease. “Some say you are John the Baptist come back from the dead. Yeah, I’ve heard that. Some say you are Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Yeah, that’s a pretty common view. Some say you’re Elijah. Sure, I’ve heard that one too.”

But then came the clincher: “Who do you say that I am?” It can make us feel suddenly shy and vulnerable to say “I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.” But good old impetuous Peter came right out with it. That is why this passage is called “The Confession of Peter.” I wonder how the other disciples responded. Were they perhaps thinking “Whew! I’m glad Peter answered. Now I’m off the hook”

Jesus replied to Peter: “Blessed are you...you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” You probably already know that the word “Peter” means “rock.” In art, Peter is often holding a set of keys. Keys are the symbol of authority. Peter is master of the house. Peter is not actually a gatekeeper as he is often depicted in cartoons, but his

role as holder of keys is fulfilled on earth, as the chief teacher of the church. Peter has the authority to teach in Jesus' name. In Matthew's Gospel, Peter represents all the disciples as spokesperson. Apart from Jesus himself, Peter is surely the most completely portrayed character in the New Testament. The Gospels go to great lengths to stress his weakness—his fear, doubt, and impulsiveness—as well as his strength and courage. His confession, “You are the Christ” was surely one of his grandest moments. The passage comes in the midst of a description of what Matthew perceives as a blind and recalcitrant Israel. Jesus forms a new community of those who perceive and confess his true identity. Confession of faith separates the new community that Jesus is forming from those who oppose and reject it.

According to the book of Acts, Peter continued to serve as a leader in the early church in Jerusalem. He preached the first sermon after the Pentecost, performed the first healing, and authorized the extension of the Christian mission to the gentiles (although he did lag behind Paul in this mission). More than once, he was arrested and imprisoned, only to be delivered by miraculous means. According to ancient tradition, Peter became the first bishop of Rome and was there martyred during the reign of Nero. He asked to be crucified upside down—as he was unworthy of emulating his master. Catholics consider the pope to be Peter's successor.

But who do you say that Jesus is? Are you able to say “I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God? It is not in the style of Episcopalians to stand on street corners handing out tracts. It might be possible to confess our faith in church, but what about at the office or wherever you may work? There is an absolutely delightful man who comes to see me for spiritual direction. He works as an engineer for a large company. He is a very devout Christian. During work time, he keeps his Christian faith to himself. But during lunch time, he goes into his van, where he keeps his Prayer Book, Bible, and rosary. He spends his lunch time doing his devotions. One or two younger men have discovered the Christian van. Occasionally, they go quietly to my friend to ask him questions about Jesus. Years ago, when I was singing in a church choir, I got to know another woman in the choir who always wears her cross at work. The cross is a quiet sign that it is all right to ask her about her faith. It is also a signal that she is a lay pastor. You may recall that my background is in an Eastern religion called Vedanta.

Because I was for many years in a semi-cloistered convent, I didn't know much of the outside world. When I began to suspect that I may have had a Christian conversion experience, the only Christian I knew was my organ teacher. She was the only one whom I could approach to ask my first faltering questions. My teacher was a world-class musician and I had had a chance to see and hear her in performance. She had the stage presence of a real master. Yet, when it came to confessing her faith, she was hesitant because she was "only" a lay person. Afraid to speak for herself, she finally gave me a copy of C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. I will never forget that incident because we can't rely on religious professionals to confess our faith for us. In whatever sphere we work, be it an office, a school, or a church, we are representatives of Christianity for a particular group of people. We, like Peter, are responsible for one confession, our own—That confession is our rock, our contribution to the foundation and structure of God's church. Now, who do you say that Jesus is? How will you confess him?