

Sermon delivered by
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May the Lord be in our hearts and on my lips, that I may proclaim the Gospel worthily and well, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

It is possible to know the right words about Jesus and still miss the essence of who Jesus really is. We can call him Lord and still remain impressed by power and control. We can speak of love and still decide who deserves it or not. This tension gives urgency to the question, “Who do you say that I am?”

And this is where today’s Gospel meets us—not in a classroom asking for the right responses, but on the road with Jesus, where our lives reveal the answer. Before turning to Peter’s confession, let the question reach us: Who is Jesus for me, and what difference does the answer make to the way I live my life?

Jesus begins by asking what people are saying about him. The answers come readily: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. The disciples can repeat what others have said—and so can we.

We inherit words about Jesus from our families, our churches, the hymns we sing and the traditions we follow. These words may be precious, but there comes a time when Jesus asks a more personal question: “But who do you say that I am?”

I first felt Jesus nudge me gently with this question in my early twenties, when I began seriously questioning the beliefs I had inherited from my family of origin and the culture, I was raised in.

I was born in apartheid South Africa and witnessed racism justified through Christian language and biblical interpretation. Apartheid was defended by a theology claiming that racial separation was God’s intention. Yet this did not seem compatible with the Jesus I encountered in the Gospel.

I was studying social work at the time, and I became increasingly aware of the inequalities and questions of social justice in our world. When I encountered liberation theology, it opened new ways of seeing Jesus and awakened in me a desire to know him more deeply.

This experience taught me that we can read the Bible earnestly and still interpret it in ways that contradict the character of Jesus. Faithfulness sometimes asks us to examine

our inherited beliefs and consider whether they reflect the Jesus of the Gospel. This is not a rejection of faith; it can itself be an act of faith.

So when Peter is asked the question, **“But who do you say that I am?”** he answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” It is a powerful answer and Jesus affirms Peter, but there is an interesting tension in this story. Peter has said the right words, but he doesn’t yet fully understand what those words mean.

This becomes clear almost immediately when Jesus explains that he will suffer, be rejected and be killed. Peter refuses to accept it. He expects a Messiah who will conquer the empire; Jesus reveals strength through steadfast love. Peter understands power as control; Jesus embodies it through vulnerability, mercy and costly faithfulness.

Perhaps this is where the Gospel speaks most directly to us. We can say the right things about Jesus and still misunderstand him. We can call him Lord while remaining fascinated by power. We can speak of God’s kingdom while protecting our own privilege. We can proclaim love while deciding who is worthy of receiving it. Peter reminds us that getting the title right is not the same as understanding the way of Jesus.

When we picture someone in power, we might picture a throne: someone raised above everyone else, giving orders. Yet one of the clearest pictures of Jesus’ power is a basin and a towel. He kneels at the feet of his friends and serves them. Peter expects power that rises above others; Jesus reveals power that kneels beside them.

So the question is not merely whether Jesus is the Messiah, but what kind of Messiah do we believe Jesus to be—and whether we are willing to follow him.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus challenges our assumptions about power. He does not gather an army, seek wealth or status, or crush his opponents. Instead, he moves towards those from whom others turn away: people on the margins. He touches those considered untouchable, eats with those considered unacceptable, listens to voices easily ignored, welcomes outsiders, and challenges religious systems whenever rules matter more than people.

We sometimes imagine that strength means having the answer, fixing the problem or taking control. Yet many of us have known another kind of strength: the friend who sits quietly beside us when we are grieving or hurting, who does not offer easy explanations, and does not leave. Nothing has been solved, but we are no longer alone. This is not weakness. It is love strong enough to remain present.

This is what God’s reign looks like in Jesus: not domination, exclusion or fear, but love strong enough to remain present; forgiveness that releases rather than imprisons; courage that stands beside the vulnerable; faithfulness that refuses hatred; and love that endures even when it costs something.

Peter calls Jesus “the Son of the living God.” That word—*living*—matters. The God revealed in Jesus is not trapped in the past or contained by our doctrines and traditions. The living God is still calling, challenging and surprising us, still revealing love in places we may not expect.

Faith need not mean having every question settled. Questions, grief, doubt, love and experience can all become part of the road into God’s mystery. As we travel through life, that road becomes a teacher: valleys test our easy answers, hills broaden our vision, and unexpected turns reveal hidden grace.

I discovered this when I began questioning the theology in which I was raised. Rather than drawing me away from God, that experience led me more deeply into God’s mystery—and I trust that the same will remain true as my journey continues.

So where, on your own road, might God be using an unexpected turn to deepen your faith?

Perhaps that is also why Jesus entrusts his church to people who are still learning. He says to Peter, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” Peter is passionate and impulsive. He misunderstands Jesus and will later deny him. Yet Jesus sees beyond Peter’s failures and says, in effect, “I can build something with you.”

There is profound hope in that. The church is not a display case for people who have perfected faith; it is a community of ordinary, complicated people learning the way of Jesus together—getting things right, getting things wrong, needing forgiveness, and asking how to live more faithfully.

And the church Jesus builds is given keys. We often imagine keys as symbols of control: they can lock doors and determine who stays out. Churches have sometimes used religion that way, deciding who is acceptable, who belongs and whose life is worthy.

But in the hands of people learning the way of Jesus, perhaps the keys are chiefly for opening doors: for those who have been told they do not belong; those wounded by religion; those whose questions make others uncomfortable; those judged because of their past; the lonely, the grieving, the doubting and those who have almost given up on God. May we open the doors wide to all who have known rejection.

So we return to the question that has followed us along the road: “Who do you say that I am?” We may answer that Jesus reveals a love wider than our boundaries; that he dignifies every person, stands beside the vulnerable, challenges what dehumanises, and shows that forgiveness can be stronger than revenge.

But Jesus asks for more than a verbal answer. Our lives become the answer. If we say Jesus is love, do people experience love through us? If we say Jesus welcomes outsiders, do we make room? If we say Jesus stands with the vulnerable, where are we willing to stand? If we say Jesus brings healing, do we help mend what is broken?

Our answer is heard not only in what we confess with our lips, but in the direction of our lives and the shape of our actions.

Perhaps, as we grow, faith becomes less about certainty and more about trust; less about having God completely worked out and more about remaining open to God's mystery.

So today we need not produce a perfect answer. We can begin with an honest prayer: "Jesus, you are the one I am still learning to follow." Then we can take the next step in his direction.

For the living Christ still meets us on the road—challenging our borrowed answers, opening doors, and asking, "Who do you say that I am?"

May our answer be heard in the way we love, welcome and forgive; in where we stand when others are vulnerable; and in our willingness to keep growing. For perhaps the clearest way to say who Jesus is, is to let our lives take the shape of his love.

Amen.