

Matthew 16:13-20^{v vi}

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

^v About Matthew 16:13-20

Today's reading recounts Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ (Mark 8:27-29; Luke 9:18-20; John 6:67-69), and Jesus' proclamation of Peter as the rock. The common expectation was that the Christ, the Davidic Messiah, would reestablish kingly rule in some final way (24:3; Acts 1:6). Jesus radically reinterprets this expectation by joining it immediately to the charge to his disciples not to use this term and to the prediction of his suffering, death, and resurrection.

In Matthew, two titles, "Son of Man" and "Son of God," are brought together to affirm and expand the understanding of the Messiah. Jesus asks his disciples for the popular opinion of the "Son of Man." This is the term Jesus has chosen as his self-designation for his public ministry on earth (8:20).

The disciples' reply is based upon common expectations (14:2; Malachi 4:5). In Matthew, Peter's confession includes "the Son of the living God." Whereas "Son of Man" is the title Jesus gives himself, "Son of God" is the title given to Jesus by those who truly recognize who he is: the demons (8:29), the disciples (14:33), the Roman soldiers at the cross (27:54). The

authorities and crowds use it only in derision (27:40, 43).

Verses 17-19 are found only in Matthew. Jesus responds that Peter's confession is based upon revelation from God, not upon human sources (11:25), and is the kind of faith on which the Church will be founded. In the gospels, the word "church" (Greek, "ekklesia") occurs only here and in 18:17. This word was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament and in other writings to designate both the assembly of the whole people of Israel and the local synagogue. Here it seems to refer to the people of God, the Church, as a whole.

The terms "bind" and "loose" are technical terms either for the teaching authority of a rabbi to interpret a law as obligatory or non-obligatory in a given case, or the disciplinary authority to exclude from or admit to the congregation. It is this power that the Pharisees have misused (23:4,13), and that is given to all the disciples in 18:18. As he does throughout this section (chapters 14-17), Matthew here weaves together Christology (who Jesus is) and ecclesiology (the Church as the people of God assembled in faith).

^{vi} **Reflection and Response**

In scripture, the act of naming is an act of power. The first act of Adam that shows his kinship with God is the naming of the animals. "And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name" (Genesis 2:19).

The power of naming is acknowledged also in the Ten Commandments. The prohibition against using God's name wrongly probably was designed to prevent acts of magic in which the practitioner uttered God's name as part of a curse or spell.

In Psalm 138—as in many others—the psalmist praises God's name, a formula that meant praising God's own self. "I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name" (Psalm 138:2).

Psychologists have warned us that the names and labels we give to children—and others!—can affect both their self-image and behavior. In one startling study, researchers worked with two elementary school classes. One group of students was exhorted regularly to pick up litter and take care of its surroundings. Students in the other class were simply told that they were an especially tidy class who did a great job of taking care of things. The children that were named caring acted caring; they outscored all other students on environmental awareness and

actions.

Did Jesus have this power of naming in mind when he gave to that wavering disciple Simon the nickname Peter, “the Rock”? We think of Peter sinking in the sea, arguing with Jesus that he should avoid the cross, and betraying Jesus at the time of his trial and death. But he was Jesus’ Rock nonetheless, destined to follow Jesus in ministry and martyrdom.

Peter was only the first of Jesus’ followers to receive a nickname. Jesus also gave the nickname “Sons of Thunder” to James and John (Mark 3:17). Francis of Assisi was known by the name “il poverello,” the “Little Poor Man.” These and other nicknames reveal to us something of the people themselves. So does Peter’s naming of Jesus reveal to us something of who walks through the pages of the gospel and the minutes of our lives. “You are the Christ,” says Peter, “the Son of the Living God.”

Not simply teacher, not a prophet only, but the Christ, the anointed one, the one chosen by God, and the Son of God.

In his spiritual guide, *Sadhana*, the late Anthony de Mello challenges his readers to write a list of a thousand names for Jesus. The next exercise may seem even more daunting; de Mello asks us to use each of these names for ourselves.

Imagine a voice saying to you, “You are my anointed one, my chosen, my very own child.”

Quietly consider: Imagine a voice saying to you, “You are my anointed one, my chosen, my very own child.” What do you respond?