

Exploring Christianity

Who is Jesus?

At Baptism and Confirmation candidates are asked to affirm the faith of the Church using the words of the Creed in a question-and-answer form. This ancient, honoured, and highly condensed statement of faith sets forth what Christians believe with regards to God, the Church, and the entirety of creation.

This raises a deeper question: who do we believe Jesus to be? Who is Jesus?

For Christians, being able to articulate who Jesus is matters because faith is first and foremost relational rather than an intellectual exercise. To name who Jesus is – to the best of our ability – is to begin to enter into that relationship consciously. It helps move us from vague impressions to a more personal trust. It also shapes how we live: who we believe Jesus to be will influence how we pray, how we see ourselves, and how we respond to others.

“Who do you say that I am?” is the question Jesus also asked to his first followers inviting from them a deeply personal response. In this we see that Christianity is not only about learning ideas and revealed truths (dogmas); it is about encountering a person and responding to him.

This question of Jesus is not a test to pass, but an invitation to receive his life in us, to reflect on him, and to begin to speak, however tentatively, from the heart.

Lectio Divina: Matthew 16:13-20

Read the whole passage slowly a few times, keeping one or two minutes of silence between each time. As you listen, notice if a word or phrase stands out to you. Stay with it.

^{16:13} Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

¹⁴ And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ 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.”

²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Broader Picture:

In the Gospel of Matthew, this moment takes place in the region of Caesarea Philippi and that setting is far from incidental.

Caesarea Philippi was a centre of pagan worship marked by temples, shrines, and symbols of imperial power. It was a place where many voices made claims about the divine – where people could literally point to different “gods” and competing visions of reality. It stood, in many ways, as a symbol of a world full of spiritual options, political authority, and religious confusion.

It is precisely there that Jesus asks his disciples: “Who do people say that I am?” and then, more personally, “Who do you say that I am?”

Surrounded by competing claims about who or what is worthy of trust and worship, Jesus invites his disciples to make a distinction – to recognise something unique, even absolute, about him. This is not asked in the safety of a synagogue or among those who already believe, but at the edge, in a place where faith could easily be diluted or lost among many alternatives.

So, this Gospel moment is not just about identifying Jesus correctly; it is about doing so in the midst of a world full of other voices. That is what makes it so relevant. The question Jesus asks at Caesarea Philippi is the same question he asks in every age, including our own: not only what do people say, but who do you say that I am – here and now, in the concrete reality of your life, among all the other claims on your attention and your heart?

Interpretation Notes: Peter's Answer

We can break down Peter's answer to Jesus' question in four key components that make up the Christian faith, and a further point of personal reflection.

1) "The Christ"

"Christ" (Greek *Christos*) translates the Hebrew *Messiah*, meaning "the Anointed One." In the Old Testament we encounter anointing with oil as the sign of God's mandate and consecration for specific tasks and vocations. These include kingship, priesthood in the Temple, and prophetic ministry.

- Kings: First Book of Samuel 16 (David anointed)
- Priests: Book of Leviticus 8
- Prophetic hope: Book of Isaiah 61:1 (*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me..."*)

By the time of Jesus, "Messiah" carried expectations of a deliverer who would exercise political, royal, priestly, prophetic, and even cosmic, powers.

Jesus both fulfils and reshapes this expectation – not a conquering king, but a suffering one (cf. immediately after, Matthew 16:21).

→ In early Christian thought Saint Irenaeus of Lyons emphasises that Christ "recapitulates" humanity – fulfilling Israel's story and bringing it to completion. Saint Augustine of Hippo sees Christ as the true King whose reign is established not by force, but by love.

When we say that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, we affirm that Jesus is not just a teacher; he is the long-awaited one in whom God's promises come together.

2) “Son of God”

“Son of God” can mean different things in the Old Testament. For example, the nation of Israel is described as God’s son in Exodus, while in Psalm 2 that title is given to the King of Israel. But in Jesus, this title deepens beyond metaphor.

In the Gospels, at the Baptism and at the Transfiguration of Jesus, we hear the affirmation: “*This is my beloved Son*” (Matthew 3:17 and 17:5) Here, sonship is not just a role; it points to a unique relationship with the Father.

→ In early Christian thought Saint Athanasius of Alexandria insists that the Son is not created but shares the very being of the Father. Saint Hilary of Poitiers defends that “Son of God” is not honorary but essential – Jesus truly is God from God.

To call Jesus “Son of God” is to say something profound about who he is, not just what he does.

3) “Son of the Living God”

Peter’s declaration of faith adds something important: the word “living.”

In Scripture, the “living God” is often contrasted with lifeless idols:

- Book of Jeremiah 10:10 (“*The Lord is the true God; he is the living God...*”)
- Book of Psalms 115 (idols that cannot speak, see, or hear)

At Caesarea Philippi – a place associated with pagan worship – this confession becomes even sharper: Jesus is not one figure among many; he is uniquely related to the living God – to the One who acts, creates, and remains present in history.

→ In early Christian thought Saint John Chrysostom notes the boldness of Peter's confession in a setting filled with competing claims about the divine. Saint Cyril of Alexandria stresses that in Christ we encounter the true and living God personally, not abstractly.

This is about a God who is real, active, and present—not distant or theoretical.

4) Revealed

Immediately after Peter's confession, Jesus says: "*Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.*"

→ In early Christian thought Origen of Alexandria sees this as the beginning of true knowledge – when insight is given by God, not just derived from observation.

Saint Gregory the Great emphasises that Peter speaks for the Church, but only because he first listens to God.

Our learning and meditation on the person of Christ (Christology) are not simply constructed by reasoning; they are received as revelation from the Father. This means that reading Scripture and learning about the faith has to go hand-in-hand with prayer and participation in Church worship.

It's okay not to "have it all figured out." Recognising Jesus is something we grow into, often gradually.

5) What does this mean for me?

The Apostle Paul writes:

“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9)

Paul’s language takes Peter’s insight one step further – not by correcting it, but by drawing out its implications. If Jesus is truly the Christ, the Son of the living God, then he is not just to be recognised... but entrusted with our lives.

The word Paul uses is a strong one (Greek *Kyrios*). It implies

- Authority, not just admiration
- Relationship, not just belief
- Surrender, not just agreement

In the Greek Old Testament, *Kyrios* is the word used for the divine name itself. So, to confess “*Jesus is Lord*” is to place him at the very centre of one’s life and, in a profound sense, to recognise him within the identity of God.

St Peter speaks his answer.

St Paul invites us to live it.

And today, perhaps quietly, perhaps uncertainly, we are invited to begin to say it too.

Questions for reflection:

If you can, write down your answer in a notebook or a prayer journal, for your own use only. Writing can help you reflect more deeply on the questions.

- What have I heard about Jesus from others – family, culture, or media?
- When I hear the name “Jesus,” what are the first thoughts or images that come to mind?
- Jesus then asks, “But who do you say that I am?” How does it feel to be asked this question personally?
- What might make it difficult to answer this question honestly?
- If Jesus is who Peter says he is, how might that begin to change the way I see my life or my relationship with God?
- What would it mean for me to call Jesus Lord in my own life?
- Is there any part of my life that I would hesitate to place under his care or authority?



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