

High St Uniting Church Frankston  
Living What we confess                      Matthew 16:13 – 20



*Jesus said to them, “And who do you say that I am?” They replied, “You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being, the ontological foundation of the context of our very selfhood revealed.” And Jesus said, “What?”*

There is a tendency in our churches to want to rewrite scripture and creeds because the statements are too simplistic or have become jargon or are out of step with current theology. And

yet, Peter's simple confession – “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God” – brings forth congratulation from Jesus. We know that Peter didn't fully understand what he was saying, the very next story shows that, as he tries to stop Jesus from talking about the crucifixion that he must endure. And we can see that it's a problematic statement, because immediately Jesus tells them all to stop using the title 'Messiah', presumably because that title, in popular thought, has too many definitions that Jesus doesn't fit or want to follow. But still, given all those problems, Jesus congratulates Peter for saying it! The minimum standard for baptism and entry to the community of faith is not a degree in theology or a mastery of modern philosophical language, but simply the faith to see Jesus as someone more than just a teacher, or a prophet. The rock that Jesus is talking about is the spiritual vision to see Jesus as someone in whom you can have faith.

Analysis of the language of this story, and the context, shows that this is not about anointing Peter as Jesus successor. The gathered community of disciples is the way that Jesus lives on in the world. The rock that the community is built on is the shared confession of Jesus as the Messiah, or Christ, the Son of the living God or the One who is God on earth. The keys of the kingdom, the keys to interpret scripture and admit people to the community, to life with God, is Jesus as the Christ. As much as we might have difficulty interpreting what 'Christ' means, and what 'Son of God' means, and even what 'Living God' means, particularly for those outside the church, this simple confession was the bedrock and heart of the church that we are a part of and inheritors of. An attempt to describe Jesus within the limits of the language and understanding of that time and culture.

So, we are now the keepers of the keys to the community and the realm of God. And it's important that we don't use those keys to lock out people who have a different understanding or a different language. We can change the language to a more understandable set of words, not the flowery philosophical language that I started with, but something like, “You are the promised one, in unique and welcoming relationship with the present, engaging God”. That may be helpful to some, however, if someone has no background in the history of God and the people of Israel, what does 'promised' mean? We have the keys and should use them to unlock or open the barriers to understanding the faith. We can look through our storehouse of scripture and faith statements and confession to find other terms and ways to express the simple basis of our faith. Look to the words and terms used in scripture when the gospel is being preached to those without a background in scripture; Jesus is a man anointed by God

with power and authority, someone appointed by God to bring peace, a man endorsed by God through resurrection who brings acceptance. The keys to open the mystery of the gospel in simple language for this time and culture. At least we can ensure that we say Christ Jesus or Jesus the Christ, so people stop thinking Christ is Jesus family name!

And beyond what this passage means for how we describe Jesus to the world, is the issue of what our ideas of Jesus say about our living out of our faith. We are not called to high theology as the requirement for acceptance, we are called to faith and asked to follow Jesus. Our confession opens the door to life as a disciple; life lived in imitation of Jesus. Because who you confess Jesus to be sets up what 'following Jesus' can mean.

Confessing Jesus as a sort of God given guru – the spiritual and religious teacher – will lead to following being about self-improvement and social behaviour. A limited idea of what 'following Jesus' can mean.

Confessing Jesus as a prophet – a special man inspired to reveal the way that God wants us to live – will lead to following being about respect and love for neighbours all around us and a thirst for justice. A more social and reaching out idea of what 'following Jesus' can mean.

Confessing Jesus as the Son of the Living God – God with us – will lead to following the very source of life. This is what Jesus was talking about when he described himself as 'The way, the truth, and the life'. The ideas of spiritual teaching or divine revelation raised to new heights of our lives being held in God's love.

It is said that 'Jesus is Lord' is the simplest confession, and a very powerful one in its original setting because it challenged the statement, 'Caesar is Lord'. But Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God, is surely a close second. Such simple, heart-felt confessions are what baptism is about, not the passing of a theology exam. And such simple, heart-felt confessions are what the church is built on. Because the requirements aren't in confession and theology, but in living out what you confess; living out compassion, helping the poor, healing the sick and welcoming the stranger. Life lived in accordance with the law of love and life lived in accordance with the simple confession of faith. In the coming months we will be presented with Gospel stories about the end of times and the judgement of our lives, and we will find, surprisingly for some, that entry to the realm of God and the fulness of life with God is not judged on fine words of theology or understanding of religion, but on actions of love, "what you did for the least of these, you did for me."

Who you say Jesus is, is important not as theology, but as the basis for your life and your actions. Trying to find acceptable, understandable words to describe Jesus to the world is less important than living out our faith in a way that is attractive to people because it makes God and Jesus understandable in real life and not just religious ideas.

Who do you say Jesus is? Jesus is the One who's life, death and resurrection calls us to follow God's way of love, of justice, of compassion, and of devotion to God. That is the rock on which the community of faith is built.