

8 Seeing the king (Matthew 15–16)

Welcome back. Has the first half of Matthew's Gospel given you a fresh appreciation of Jesus' identity and mission? Have you been pondering on how his identity and mission shapes our identity and mission?

While you're fresh tonight, we're going to skip quickly over Matthew 15 and focus on Matthew 16. In Matthew 15 his own people resist his authority (verses 1-20) while a foreigner recognizes him as the heir of King David (verses 21-28). Then Jesus feeds 4000 people in the gentile region east of Galilee (verses 29-39). It's like the gentiles are quicker to recognize the Messiah than the Jews are.

In Matthew 16, the disciples finally realize who Jesus is. Recognizing his authority changed everything for them, just as it changes everything for us.

Please turn to Matthew 16 in your Bible, and section 8.2 (page 101) of the notes.

8.1 Who can see Jesus' authority? (Matthew 15)

Every culture has expectations of how we should participate. Our family, workplace, and church all place expectations on us of how we dress, when to turn up, and how to behave. Some expectations are helpful to maintain relationships. Other expectations are pressure to comply with those who hold power in the group.

Caring versus controlling (15:1-20)

Jesus resisted those who wanted to make him comply with their rules and expectations. As a result, they painted him as a rebel, a bad example, someone people should not follow. Here's a case in point:

Matthew 15:1-9 (my translation)

¹ Then Pharisees and Bible scholars from Jerusalem approached Jesus saying, ² "Why is it that your followers contravene the cultural values of our elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat."

Washing hands before eating is not a bad thing. It makes sense to wash the germs off our hands before eating so we don't get sick. But these people weren't thinking about germs. We've only been aware of microbes for 300 – 400 years. Previously, people had observed that you were less likely to get sick if you washed your hands, but they were superstitious about the cause.

Jewish culture had rigid food laws. Some foods were *clean*; others were *unclean* (Leviticus 11). People were fastidious about following these rules. One of Jesus' followers could honestly say, "Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth" (Acts 11:8).

Imagine going to the market to buy food. You only bought clean food, but you may have come in contact with something unclean (e.g. Leviticus 15:5-27, note verse 11). If you then ate without washing, you would take the "uncleanness" into your body.

And the Pharisees had a strong focus on the spiritual realm. If you were unclean, you would attract unclean spirits. They've already told the people that Jesus was in league with the evil spirit realm (9:34; 10:25; 12:24). Now they're trying to frighten people into believing they're in danger of taking uncleanness into themselves if they follow Jesus.

What was the occasion when Jesus' followers ate food without washing their hands? Matthew has just described one (14:19). 5000 people ate the food he provided in the wilderness where there was no opportunity to wash first.

So here's what the Pharisees make of that event. They don't see it as a sign that God is providing for his people in the wilderness, just as he did in Moses' time. They don't see this as Jesus leading a new exodus from oppressive rulers (14:10) as he restores the kingdom of God. Because they can't control Jesus, they portray him as a Pied Piper leading the children of Israel into slavery to the powers of evil.

Jesus responds by pointing out their blind spot:

Matthew 15:3-9

³ In reply he said, "Why is it that you contravene the command of God with your cultural values?" ⁴ For God said,

Honour your father and your mother [Exodus 20:12] and

Put to death the one who reviles father or mother. [Exodus 21:17]

⁵ But you say if someone tells their father or their mother, 'The help you would have received from me, I'm giving as an offering,' ⁶ they need not honour their parent. And so you overturn God's decree with your cultural values.

⁷ "You play actors! Isaiah was right about you when he said:

⁸ *This people honour me with their lips,
but their heart stays far away from me.*

⁹ *They perform my rituals meaninglessly,
teaching instructions that are human commands.*" [Isaiah 29:13]

Effectively, Jesus said, "You're so worried about food laws as a way to impose your power, but you don't care about the relationships that matter. The Law made disrespecting parents a capital offence, so it must be an important value. But you devalue what's important when it suits you—so you can get money for the coffers."

The reason they're attacking the leader God has given them is that they want power over the community. God has not appointed them, so they're just **acting** a role like a performer. But the performance is meaningless to God, like Isaiah said. They're doing nothing but imposing their own commands on people who should be ruled by God—like any godless ruler does.

Jesus now turns to the crowd, to free them from the fear imposed by these fake rulers:

Matthew 15:10-20

¹⁰ Calling out to the crowd, he said to them, "Listen, and get this.

¹¹ It's not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person; what comes out of the mouth, that's what defiles a person." ¹² Then the disciples came up to tell him, "You do realize that when the Pharisees heard what you said, they fell out with you?"

¹³ In response, he said, "All the plants that my heavenly Father did not plant will be torn out. ¹⁴ Let them go. They are blind leaders. And when the blind lead the blind, they both fall in a hole."

¹⁵ In response, Peter said to him, "Explain to us how the story relates."

¹⁶ He said, “You still don’t get it? ¹⁷ Don’t you understand that everything that goes into the mouth makes its way into the gut and ends up excreted in the toilet? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart and that’s what defiles a person. ¹⁹ For out of the heart rises the rationale for evil: murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, robberies, perjuries, defamations. ²⁰ These are the things that defile a person. Eating with unwashed hands does not defile a person.”

Jesus turns this around 180°. What goes *into* the mouth does not make a person unclean as the Pharisees have been saying. What comes *out of* the mouth reveals what you’re thinking, whether your intentions towards people are clean or unclean.

The Pharisees and scribes claimed their rules would protect people from invasion by evil, but Jesus smelt death in their words. Their rules were just a cover to get people under their power. Jesus isn’t under their control, so they want to get rid of him.

The examples Jesus gave in verse 19 are relational. Murder is intent to destroy. Adultery is intent to violate trust. Immorality is intent to use someone for personal pleasure without commitment to them. Robbery is intent to forcibly take what belongs to another. Lying is intent to deceive a person or community, to shift the burden of responsibility. Defamation is intent to destroy a person’s reputation and credibility.

All these things rise out of a heart that’s intent on benefiting the self, at the cost of the other. They’re all relational issues. For Jesus, sin is not about breaking rules, but breaking relationships.

The disciples are concerned that his answer has only deepened the rift between Jesus and these self-appointed leaders (verse 12). Jesus considers them to be weeds in God’s farm (verse 13), but he has no interest in pulling up the weeds (compare 13:29). His concern is for the tender plants these “weeds” are smothering. Israel’s history of exile has shown how blind leaders lead the nation down into slavery.

So what have we learnt from this passage?

1. Don’t over-spiritualize. Preoccupation with evil leads people into fear.
2. Don’t focus on making people obey rules when God’s focus is on relationships.
3. Discern whether people are imposing their will on you, or whether they care about your well-being. What comes out of their mouth gives it away.
4. Jesus’ interpretation of Scripture is relational.

Who belongs at God’s table? (15:21-28)

Now for something that sounds offensive. I mean, would you be offended if someone compared you to a dog?

Matthew 15:21-28

²¹ Leaving there, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

²² And look, a Canaanite woman from these parts approached shouting, “Help me! Lord! Son of David! My daughter is suffering, tormented by a demon.”

²³ He didn’t respond, not a word. His followers approached him requesting, “Send her away, because she keeps calling out behind us.”

²⁴ He replied, "I was not sent, except to the lost sheep of Israel's house."

²⁵ She came and knelt before him, "Lord! Help me!"

²⁶ He replied, "It is not good to take bread from the children and throw it to the dogs."

²⁷ She said, "Yes it is Lord, for the dogs eat the scraps that fall from their master's table."

²⁸ Then in response Jesus said, "Woman, your trust is awesome. Let what you want be done for you." And her daughter was cured from that moment.

Why was Jesus so reticent to help her? Was he trying to offend her?

The context is that Jesus has just *withdrawn* from confrontation with the Pharisees (verse 21). It's not his job to pull the weeds from God's garden (verse 13). We've seen him *withdraw* from both the Pharisees (12:14-15) and from Herod (4:12; 14:13).

But where can he go? Galilee and Jerusalem don't recognize his authority, so he leaves Israel for a break. Tyre and Sidon were cities of Phoenicia (Lebanon today). And he didn't want anyone to know he was there (Mark 7:24).

So the distressed mother who outs him is not Jewish. She's *a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia* (Mark 7:26). That's the politically correct description.

Matthew calls her a *Canaanite* (verse 22). That's an antiquated, emotionally loaded term. No one in the Greco-Roman world spoke of *Canaanites*. The Canaanites were enemies that Joshua drove from Canaan 1200 years earlier. They were supposed to destroy the Canaanites (Deuteronomy 20:17).

But this "Canaanite" is no enemy of the new "Joshua." (Jesus = *Joshua* in Hebrew.) Some of his own people have been trying to kill Jesus (Matthew 12:14), but this "Canaanite" recognizes Jesus' authority and calls him *Lord* (verse 22).

Now, *Lord* is a broad term of submission. A slave called the master of the household *Lord*. Citizens called Caesar *Lord*. People prayed to God as *Lord*. What did she understand as the extent of his authority?

Her next phrase spells it out: she recognizes Jesus as the *son of David*, the king of God's people!

But she's not an Israelite. She has no claim on his kingship. His all-consuming highly-focused mission was to gather the harassed and downtrodden sheep of Jacob's household (9:35-36). The shepherd-king insisted his servants were to focus only on *the lost sheep of Israel* (10:5-6).

How can he dissuade her? If he grants her request they'll be overwhelmed. It will be the end of their break. He ignores her. The king's silence is her answer.

But she doesn't stop, and Jesus' followers can't cope with her insistent pleas. They want Jesus to send her away. Jesus doesn't want to do that either. The king explains to his servants why he is not granting her request (verses 23-24).

She heard what he said, of course, but she refuses to go away. She approaches the king, kneels before him, and pleads for his help (verse 25).

Finally, the king speaks to her. It's a royal rebuke. He tells her the same thing he told his followers. She's not part of the covenant people who sit at God's table, and she has no claim on the Jewish Messiah.

She may have heard Jews demeaning gentiles as "dogs." He may be expecting her to take offence and stop pursuing him.

Instead, she turns his rebuke around. To him, she may be a needy puppy (the term Jesus used is diminutive), but couldn't a puppy have a crumb from the royal table?



Jesus is shocked by her *great faith*. He's not talking about her capacity to conjure up enough belief to get a miracle. What surprises him is the relational trust she has in Israel's king. This foreigner is doing a better job of recognizing God's anointed king than his own people. The only other case where Jesus spoke of *great faith* was also a foreigner—an army officer who understood Jesus' authority (8:5-13).

Even John the Baptist had taken offence at what the Messiah was (or wasn't) doing with his authority. Jesus offered him, "*Blessing on anyone who does not take offence at me*" (11:6).

Now the king extends that blessing to this Canaanite. She's no enemy of God's reign. Just as Jesus has done (5:43-48), Matthew is overturning the way we think about our enemies.

At the height of the cold war, a British musician named Sting wrote a song called *Russians*. At the time, the Russians were being presented as the enemy of the free world, inhuman beings who could destroy the world with the press of a nuclear button. Sting wanted us to see them as human beings, not enemies to be destroyed. His song kept returning to the refrain, "I hope the Russians love their children too."

Turns out that the Canaanites love their children too.

Matthew knows. When Jesus is raised up with all authority in heaven and on earth, the people of the nations will trust his kingship ahead of many of those sat at God's table for centuries. Jesus looks forward to the day when we'll all be coming to him to take our place at God's table (8:11).

But for Jesus, there is no break. He has to leave and head back to Galilee (verse 29). Set one person free from the power of evil, and the whole region will be seeking his help. That's how much the world needs the restoration of God's reign in Christ (the gospel). Jesus looks forward to the day when we'll all be coming to him to take our place at God's table (8:11).

The inescapable need (15:29-39)

Jesus returns to Galilee, but not the familiar western side of Capernaum and Magadan (verse 39). He's in the Decapolis (Mark 7:31), the rugged eastern side of Galilee that was gentile territory. If he was hoping for a break there, that's not what happens:

Matthew 15:29-39

²⁹ Moving on from that spot, Jesus walked along beside the Sea of Galilee and up the mountain, and he sat down there.

³⁰ Large crowds came to him, bringing with them people who were lame, blind, crippled, deaf, and many others. They laid them at Jesus feet, and he healed them. ³¹ So, the crowd was astounded—seeing the deaf speaking, the cripples restored, the lame walking, the blind seeing—and they glorified the God of Israel.

³² Gathering his followers, Jesus said, "I feel for the crowd. They've already stayed with me for three days without having anything to eat. I don't want to dismiss them without food in case they collapse on the way."

³³ His followers say to him, "Where in this deserted place could we get enough food to satisfy a crowd like this?"

³⁴ Jesus says to them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven, and a few little fish."

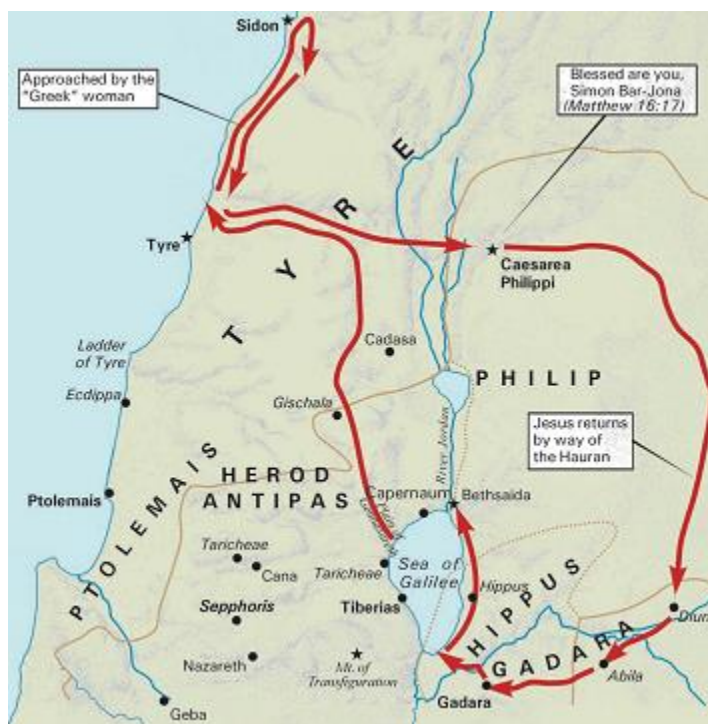
³⁵ Instructing the crowd to sit on the ground, ³⁶ he took the seven loaves and the fish, and giving thanks he broke it and was handing it to his followers, who passed it on to the crowds. ³⁷ They all ate and were satisfied. They picked up seven baskets of leftover pieces. ³⁸ Those who ate were 4000 men, not counting the women and children.

³⁹ Dismissing the crowds, he got into the boat and crossed over to the regions of Magadan.

Jesus now is doing the same thing for gentiles that he has been doing for his own people. He's dealing with their afflictions, and providing food for them.

And just as he did with the 5000, Jesus calls his servants to participate in providing his care to everyone. He asks them to bring him what they have, as little as it seems. Under his blessing, what they give him provides for everyone.

Is this a pattern for how his grass-roots kingdom works? Jesus' government doesn't have departments for Medicare and Centrelink: just servants who participate in caring as he cares with what they have. What do you think?



Map: *Understanding the Bible: Understanding the Life of Jesus: An Introductory Atlas* (Carta, 2019), 26.

8.2 Heaven reveals who Jesus is (Matthew 16)

Signs of the times (16:1-4)

Amazingly, even non-Jews were beginning to recognize Jesus' authority (Matthew 15). Yet the leaders of Israel were missing the significance of what God was doing in Christ:

Matthew 16:1-4

¹ Pharisees and Sadducees approached to put him under pressure, asking him to show them a sign from heaven.

² In reply he said, "At dusk you say, 'It will be calm, for the heavens are red.' ³ And in the morning, 'Today will be stormy, for the heavens are red and threatening.' You do know how to discern the face of the heavens, but you are unable to discern the signs of the times. ⁴ An evil and adulterous generation seeks a sign, and no sign will be given to it except Jonah's sign." Leaving them behind, he moved away.

Signs of the times? People are fascinated with that phrase. "What are the signs that we're in the end times?" That's a popular phrase today, but it's not what Jesus meant. And the phrase occurs nowhere else in Scripture.

Jesus wasn't referring to "end times" for us. He was referring to his own times.

They didn't have a Bureau of Meteorology, but they knew how to look at the sky to see what tomorrow would be like. The religious leaders should be able to see what God was doing among them. His Messiah was right there, under their noses.

They were living at the hinge of history, the most important times of the entire Biblical narrative. They were missing the significance of the times they were in.

They're still asking him for signs, as they did in 12:38. He gave the same answer he did in 12:39: *the sign of Jonah*. They would see Jesus following the same trajectory as Jonah: thrown overboard, sinking to the depths, rescued from death on the third day, and calling the nations into submission to God's sovereign authority.

Let's not focus on searching for signs of the end times. Let's get our eyes back on Jesus. He is our future, the heaven-anointed ruler for all nations and all times.

One day, every knee will bow to his authority and every tongue will acknowledge him as Lord. He calls us to embody that future today, to live as his kingdom, doing life together under his authority, expressing his care for everyone and everything in his creation. Like Jonah and Jesus, we are the living sign of his reign in our times.

The leaven of the leaders (16:5-12)

Leaven is something like the starter you need to make sourdough bread:

Matthew 16:5-12

⁵ His followers crossed to the other side, without remembering to bring food. ⁶ Jesus told them, "Look out! Be on your guard against the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." ⁷ They discussed it among themselves, "Oops; we didn't bring any bread."

⁸ Jesus realized and said, “Why discuss among yourselves that you have no bread, you who have little faith? ⁹ Don't you get it yet? Don't you remember the five rolls of the 5000, and how many basketfuls you collected? ¹⁰ Not even the seven rolls of the 4000, and how many bags you collected? ¹¹ How could you think I was talking to you about food? Be on your guard against the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

¹² Then they realized that he wasn't talking about guarding against bread-making leaven, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Jesus just overturned the leaders' expectations about signs. He also overturned their metaphor about leaven:

- Pharisees used leaven as a metaphor for **evil**. If you leave a little bit of evil in the community, it infects everyone and permeates everything (compare 1 Corinthians 5:6; Galatians 5:9).
- Jesus used leaven as a metaphor for his **kingdom**. It looked so small and localized in Jesus' time, but it would permeate the whole of society until all the earth became the community under heaven's reign (13:33).

These Pharisees and Sadducees wanted to control society, to point out and root out evil in the society wherever they saw it, before it could spread. God had not authorized them to tear out the weeds in his community. When we try to do that, we tear out genuine plants as well (13:29-30).

So, Jesus turned their own metaphor against them. “Guard against the leaven (i.e. the evil) of the Pharisees and Sadducees” means to recognize the evil intentions of the religious leaders who want to control society by telling everyone how sinful they are. Our judgementalism has been one of the most damaging attacks on the kingdom of God for the last 2000 years, and continues to be so today.

The twist in the story is that the disciples themselves prove Jesus' point. The disciples don't say, “Ah, Jesus is talking about the evil attitudes of the leaders who want to control us by making us feel guilty.” They respond with guilt: “Ah no! We blew it. We forgot the bread!”

How pervasive is guilt! Even when Jesus was warning us not to let religious leaders manipulate us with guilt, they responded by feeling guilty!!!

Friends, this is serious. The church of the Middle Ages tried to control people with guilt. You had to confess your sins to a priest and perform whatever penance he required of you. “Beware the leaven of the leaders,” Jesus told his people.

The Reformation told us that it is God who justifies (not the church), by faith (not by works of penance). But we're still imputing guilt on people to make them respond to us. We still want to label people as “sinners” to get them to respond to us through guilt. This is not the gospel Jesus proclaimed.

Beware the leaven of the leaders who see everything as evil. How do we reframe our message so we're exalting Jesus instead of condemning people? Suggestions?

The revelation of Jesus' identity (16:13-17)

For three years, Jesus has waited for his followers to recognize who he is, without claiming the title for himself. The big moment comes when he asks them:

Matthew 16:13-16

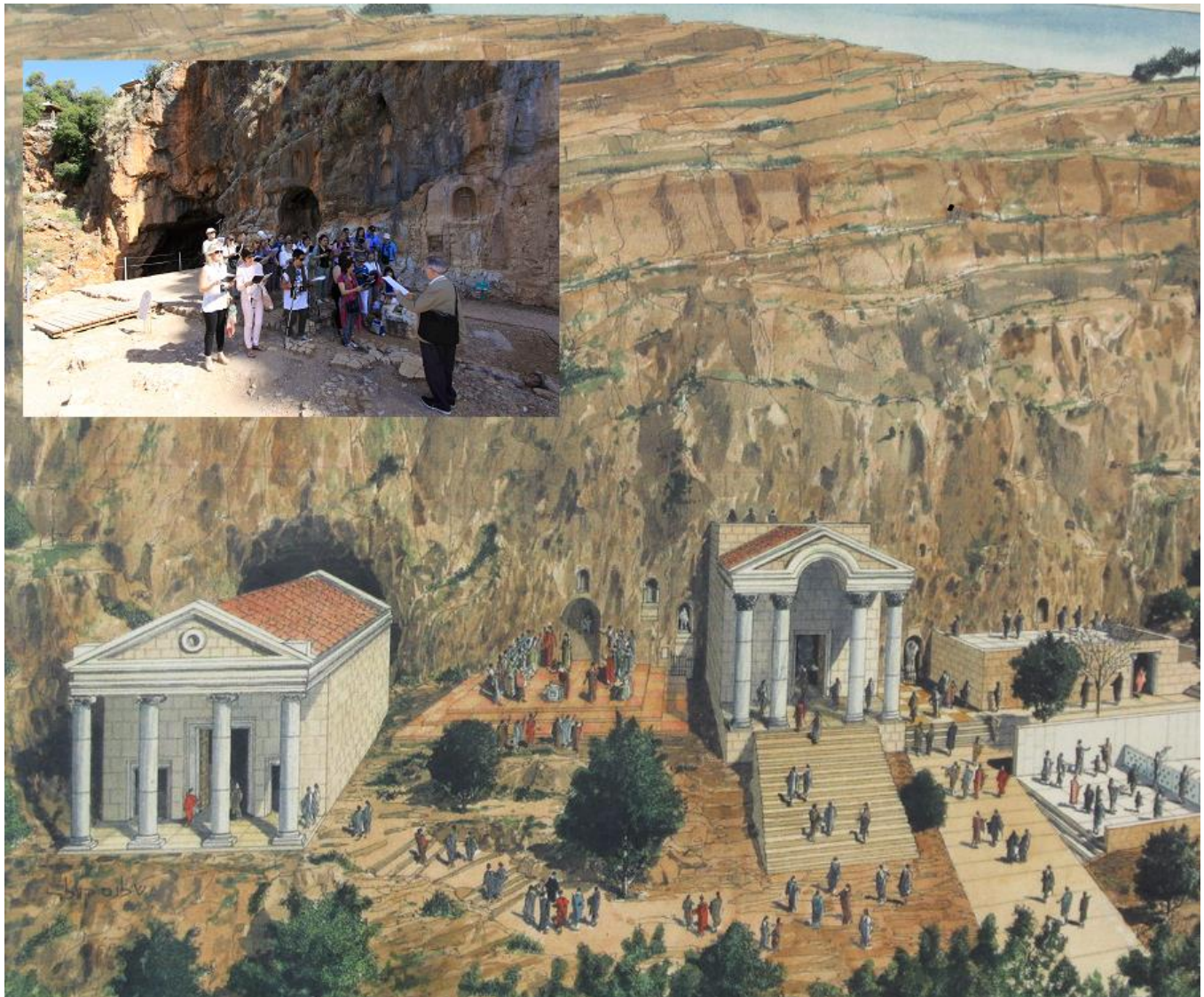
¹³ Arriving in the Caesarea Philippi area, Jesus was questioning his followers, "Who do people say I am, the son of man?"

¹⁴ They told him, "Some say John the Baptizer. Others Elijah. Others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

¹⁵ He says to them, "What about you? Who do you say I am?"

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the anointed ruler [Christ], the heir [Son] with the authority of the living God."

So much is going on here. For starters, why take them to Caesarea Philippi? That's more than a day's walk north of Galilee.



Caesarea Philippi (artist's impression), and Caesarea Philippi today (inset). Photos: Allen Browne, 2017, 2014.

It's a beautiful place, the headwaters of one of the three streams that feeds the Jordan River. And in the first century there were temples to honour of the most important authorities of the Greco-Roman world:

- The temple in the centre was for Zeus, the head of the Greek gods.
- The temple on the left was for Caesar Augustus, the head of the Empire.
- Behind Augustus' temple was the Grotto to Pan. This cave was said to be the entrance to the underworld.

Before all these monuments to the alleged rulers of the heavens, the earth, and the underworld, Jesus asked how people about saw him, his place in the world.

The public consensus was that Jesus was a **prophet**. He sounded like the most recent one (John), the greatest one (Elijah), or the one who announced the fall of Jerusalem (Jeremiah).

Jesus provided a hint. In verse 13 he used the same term he's been using all along and especially in this section about his identity (16:13, 27, 28; 17:9, 12, 22),

What does *son of man* mean? (If you're not sure, check page 48 on Matthew 8:20). A prophet brings a word from heaven, but **the son of man brings the authority of heaven to earth**.

Peter's answer nails it. But what did Peter mean by *the Christ, the Son*?

Was he making two separate statements about Jesus: *the Christ*, and *the Son*?

Or are these two ways of expressing the same thing: *the Christ*, i.e. *the Son*?

We tend to hear *Son of God* as the second person of the trinity. In the following centuries, the church developed the language of the trinity: one God in three persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's true, but it would be anachronistic to imagine that's what Peter was saying. To see what Peter meant we need to look back to how the Old Testament spoke of *the son*.

When a son of David was crowned as king, they described him as the "son" who was inheriting his regal authority from his Father who reigns in the heavens. In his coronation ceremony, the king would respond to God's declaration about him:

Psalm 2:4–7 (NIV)

⁴ The One enthroned in heaven ... says,

⁶ "I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain."

⁷ I [the king] will proclaim the LORD's decree: He said to me,

"You are my **son**; today I have become your **father**."

God had promised the kingship to David forever. So, the new king was inheriting his authority from the eternal Father who always reigns (*the living God*). That was the promise God gave David:

2 Samuel 7:12–14 (NIV)

¹² "When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. ... ¹⁴ I will be his **father**, and he will be my **son**."

The king is also called God's *anointed* in Psalm 2. YHWH reigns in the heavens, and the current king participates in his reign on earth. This is the reign of *the LORD and his anointed* (Psalm 2:2). **The anointed and the son are expressions for the same thing.**

The other Gospel writers did not think Peter had said two different things:

Mark 8:29 (NIV)

“But what about you?” he asked.

“Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

Luke 9:20 (NIV)

“But what about you?” he asked.

“Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “God’s Messiah.”

It makes no sense to say that Mark and Luke missed the bit about the trinity, or thought that wasn’t unimportant. They thought Peter had made a single statement. It’s only Matthew who spells out with a second phrase the meaning of the first.

They were certainly aware of Psalm 2. Peter quoted it (Acts 4:26). Paul quoted it (Acts 13:33). Others quoted it (Hebrews 1:5; 5:5; Revelation 2:27; 19:15). It’s one of the most quoted Psalms in the New Testament.

So, while Jesus is the second person of the trinity, Peter did not understand that yet. He’d just realized that Jesus was the anointed king. You know all those stories Jesus has been telling about the kingdom? Well, guess who is king!

Crucially, Jesus was not claiming the kingship title for himself. That would be invalid (as discussed in John 8:13-59). He was waiting for his Father to reveal his authority. And after all these years, someone has finally got the revelation:

Matthew 16:17 (interpretative expansion)

Jesus replied, “How blessed you are, Simon, son of Jonah! You’ve recognized that I am the king anointed by heaven to reign over the earth. That did not come from me, from yourself, or any human source. My Father who reigns in the heavens has given you the revelation that he is entrusting me with his authority on earth.”

It’s impossible to overstate the significance of this revelation. This is what saves the world. This is the message we proclaim. And when God opens someone’s eyes to see who Christ is, salvation has come.

That’s how it works in Acts. Check what the apostles proclaimed, and you’ll see Jesus was their good news.¹⁴ Paul was saved not by a revelation of guilt but by a revelation of the Christ (Acts 9:5). Paul then devoted his life to proclaiming the good news that God had come near in Christ. And what response did Paul expect to his gospel? *If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved* (Romans 10:9).

Unfortunately the good news about Jesus has become mired in a message of bad news about ourselves. In Catholicism, people are told to confess their sins to a priest to receive forgiveness. In Evangelicalism, people are told to confess, “I am a sinner” to receive forgiveness. We changed God’s good news about his Christ into a message about ourselves and our failures.

Matthew knew what he was doing. He placed this revelation of the Christ immediately after Jesus warning about the leaven of the leaders. What has God called us to proclaim? Our guilt, or his Christ? What revelation do people need to be saved?

¹⁴ Check it out: <https://allenbrowne.blog/2020/04/06/the-apostles-gospel/>

The king who overpowers death (16:18)

That leads us to the first mention of the *church* in the NT. Jesus continues:

Matthew 16:18 (interpretative expansion)

¹⁸ “I name you Rocky! You’re the first to recognize me like this, so you’re like a foundation stone. I will build my **assembly**, the people who gather around my kingship. No powers can block my reign: not even the gates of Death can prevent me establishing the kingship my Father has given me, the kingdom conferred by heaven.”

To help us grasp the significance of what Simon Peter just said, Jesus uses word plays. He calls him Peter. *Petros* means a little rock. It’s a nickname like *Rocky*.

But what Rocky just said is a *petra*—a boulder, a rocky outcrop you could build on. Jesus expects to build on that *petra*, the foundation stone that Peter just set in place with his words. The kingdom will be built by people recognizing Jesus as the heaven-anointed ruler (the Christ), the heir (Son) of the heavenly throne.

Jesus is building his *ekklēsia*, a word that’s usually translated as church. But an *ekklēsia* was not a religious gathering. They had a word for that: *synagōgē*.

An *ekklēsia* was a political assembly. When the Athenian citizens met to vote on the issues of the city, it was an *ekklēsia*. There’s an example like that in Acts 19:32, 39, 41. Citizens of Ephesus gathered against Paul, and the city clerk told them it was not a legal assembly (*ekklēsia*).

Ekklēsia had that political sense in the Old Testament too. Especially in Chronicles (written after the exile), the *ekklēsia* was the assembly that gathered around the king (1 Chronicles 13:2-4; 29:1, 10, 20; 2 Chronicles 30:2, 4 [LXX]).

It seems that Jesus planned to build an assembly that gathered around his leadership. And he would build this assembly by his Father revealing to people who was their heaven-sent king. The revelation the Father gave to Rocky was the bedrock for restoring heaven’s reign to the earth.

So, what would stand in the way of constructing such an assembly of people who would recognize Jesus’ leadership? What about *the gates of Hades*? (verse 18).

Hadēs is a Greek word meaning death, the grave, the place of the dead. Could the grave close its gates over him and block his reconstruction project for the world?

Remember King Herod’s attempt to kill *the king of the Jews*? (2:16) Remember Jesus warning them that kings and rulers would threaten their existence? (10:16-28)

Remember the Pharisees were already plotting to kill Jesus? (12:14)

Death (*hadēs*) would be the enemy that would threaten the reign of God’s anointed king, the existence of the *ekklēsia*, the assembly that gathered around his kingship. But Death will not close its gates around him like a city resisting his leadership. The gates of death will not hold its captives.

Now that one human being has the revelation of divine kingship, the foundation is laid for the huge global assembly that will gather around the resurrected, live-giving heaven-appointed king.

His authority in the church (16:19)

Jesus' kingship is not for his own benefit. The son of man inherits the authority God gave to humans in the beginning, in order to restore it to everyone (as in Psalm 8:4-8).

That's why he gives Peter *the keys of the kingdom*:

Matthew 16:19 (interpretative expansion)

¹⁹ "The power trusted to me is not for myself. I will entrust you with the keys to unlock heaven's kingship on earth. You (and by implication those who follow in your footsteps by recognizing me as king) will have that kind of power here on earth. As agents of heaven's authority, what you do on earth will be recognized by my Father in heaven."

Catholicism claims that this means Jesus installed Peter the first pope, and Peter passed on this authority to the next pope and so on. Holding the keys to the kingdom, they claim the power to let people into heaven or lock them out.

They're twisting the text so they can have the power to condemn or save. Matthew just warned us against *the leaven of the Pharisees*, religious leaders wanting to act as judges. That role belongs to God alone. If sin is the attempt to take the power of God into human hands, then the Catholic interpretation is sin.

What Jesus is saying is that he does not want the power for himself. As the son of man, he's the heir of the authority God gave humans in the beginning to partner with God in caring for his creation (as in Psalm 8:4-9). Humans lost that authority by rebelling against God, and the son of man is the heir who breaks down the gates of evil and death, opening the gates for the restoration of heaven's reign.

He's sharing that authority with Peter because Peter is the first to recognize the king. But it doesn't stop there: as others receive the same revelation Peter did, the king will build the assembly that gathers around him as the kingdom of heaven, restoring the reign of heaven to humanity, the dominion promised in Genesis 1:26-28.

Since Peter (and the others who receive the revelation as he did) now act as agents of heaven's government, heaven recognizes their authority (verse 19). The evils that have been binding up God's world are broken, and the reign of Christ is released on earth just as it has been decreed in heaven.

So binding and loosing (verse 19) is sometimes interpreted as a kind of spiritual warfare, but that's probably not the focus of what Jesus was saying. What do you think?

The dangerous message (16:20-26)

The disciples have just made the most important declaration, the divinely inspired revelation that Jesus is our heaven-appointed king. Why would he say, "Tell no one?"

Matthew 16:20-21 (interpretative expansion)

²⁰ "Now you've recognized me as king, here's your first order! Do not tell anyone I'm king!" ²¹ It's too dangerous! Those who claim power in



Peter with the keys, Capernaum.
Photo: Allen Browne, 2017

Jerusalem will kill me if they hear people saying I am king. You don't yet understand the process through which my kingship will be established: the king dying for his people, being raised up on the third day."

Now that the disciples have recognized Jesus kingship, Jesus begins to explain how he will receive the kingship. It's not through conquest of other powers. His kingship comes not by taking the lives of his enemies, but by giving his life for his enemies.

Tragically, the "enemies" of his kingship are not foreign oppressors but the leaders of God's people: *the elders, chief priests and Torah teachers* in Jerusalem (verse 21). To keep their own power, they will have him killed.

Those who follow Jesus and proclaim him as the God-appointed leader (the Christ) are therefore in serious danger too. He orders them to say nothing.

This is not how Peter imagined Jesus' kingship when he proclaimed Jesus as the Christ. Peter imagined the crowds in Jerusalem being so joyful that God's anointed had arrived to restore the kingdom that they would welcome the king with open arms.

Matthew 16:22-23

²² Peter took him aside and started to straighten him out, saying, "No way, Lord! It will never be like this for you!"

²³ He turned and said to Peter, "Get back in line behind me, enemy. You're tripping me up, because you're not thinking of God's agenda but a human one."

Peter's own agenda is interfering. Jesus knows that Peter is seeing himself in power, perhaps as a prime minister in Jesus' government. This is not how power works in God's kingdom. This is what's wrong with the world. The desire to dominate others is the power of the enemy. Jesus orders Peter to get back in line, to stop siding with the enemy in how they are to receive authority. (Note: I've translated *satan* as "enemy," not as a proper noun, *Enemy*. Jesus wasn't saying Peter was the Satan.)

Since Jesus' kingship arrives through self-sacrifice rather than slaughter, Jesus' followers must be willing to offer themselves in self-sacrifice too:

Matthew 16:24-26

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his followers, "If anyone wants to come with me, park your own plans, pick up your execution device, and follow me.

²⁵ For the one who wants to save their life will ruin it [ruin themselves], while the one who ruins their life on my account will find it [find themselves]. ²⁶ For what will a person benefit by gaining the entire cosmos while losing their life? What will a person trade for their life?"

We're giving our lives for the most valuable cause in human history. To follow the Christ does mean to give our lives for the cause of restoring God's reign to the earth.

The arrival of his kingdom (16:27-28)

When did Jesus expect the kingdom to arrive?

Matthew 16:27-28

²⁷ “For the son of man is about to ‘come in the splendour of his Father with his angels’, and then ‘he will repay each according to their actions.’

²⁸ I tell you the truth: there are some standing here who will not experience death until they see ‘the son of man coming in his kingdom.’”

Jesus expected his Father to give him the kingship within their lifetime.

They would see him killed by the leaders of God's people, but the Father would raise him up (verse 21). Peter didn't like it but their own lives would also be in danger and they must be willing to give their lives too (verses 22-26).

Despite the danger they faced, Jesus promised that some of the twelve would survive to see him raised up from the dead and enthroned. He would receive the kingship not through military force but by heaven's authority—the power of his Father and the angelic hosts.

He was right. All except Judas survived to see the amazing moment when heaven raised Jesus out of death and gave him *all authority in heaven and on earth* (28:18).

Jesus understands this as the process by which heaven's authority is restored to humanity. Daniel 7:13-14 described the son of man being led into the presence of the Ancient of Days to receive authority, glory and sovereign power over all the nations and peoples of every language who bow to his authority, an everlasting reign that is never overthrown, a kingdom that will never be destroyed. That's what Jesus was referring to in verse 27.

The final phrase of verse 27 is from Psalm 62:12. It's a Davidic psalm, describing how God brings salvation for his people. The king and his people face assaults against the divine kingship, but in the face of all the injustice they trust God to save them. God works it out so that those who attack him fail, while the divine power of God's reign is established by his unfailing love, bringing justice to everyone on earth. For Jesus, the resurrection is the ultimate vindication of his appointment to divine kingship.

How does this sit with you? Is this how the disciples saw Jesus' kingship in their lifetime?

8.3 Conclusion

The disciples finally recognize Jesus as their anointed Messiah, the Son appointed by heaven to reign over the earth. Jesus is thrilled. He shares his mission to build the assembly that gathers around his kingship. Then he explains that his kingship comes through being crucified by his enemies rather than by dominating his enemies.

The irony is that people from other nations seem more aware of his authority than his own people. Before Peter makes the great confession about Jesus being heaven's anointed king, a foreigner recognizes him as the Davidic king (son of David). Even the Canaanites—their previous enemies—are coming under his kingship (15:22). This was

the moment when Jesus made the call to extend his royal care to thousands in the gentile region east of Galilee for the first time (15:36-39).

As the Jewish Messiah, Jesus was sent first to gather the lost sheep of the house of Israel and restore them as a kingdom of God. But heaven's anointed will receive authority over all the earth. The son of man receives the inheritance entrusted to humanity in the beginning, restoring heaven's dominion to all people of every nation, even those who were previously enemies.

That's the good news. And it all becomes reality as people make the same confession Peter made about whom God has set in charge: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

For more detail on Matthew 15–16, see

Mat 15:1-9	Freed, or in fear? (Matthew 15:1-9)
Mat 15:1-20	A lesson in leadership and confrontation (Matthew 15:1-20)
Mat 15:10-14	Jesus' relational intelligence (Matthew 15:10-14)
Mat 15:17-20	What the heart speaks (Matthew 15:10-20)
Mat 15:21-39	Israel's king as cosmic king? (Matthew 15:21-39)
Mat 16:1-4	Signs of the times (Matthew 16:1-4)
Mat 16:5-12	How the kingdom rises (Matthew 16:5-12)
Mat 16:13-16	Declaring Jesus king (Matthew 16:13-16)
Mat 16:13-17	Jesus as global leader (Matthew 16:13-17)
Mat 16:16	What does 'Son of God' mean (Matthew 16:16)?
Mat 16:16-18	The gospel revelation (Matthew 16:16-18)
Mat 16:18	What "church" did Jesus expect? (Matthew 16:18)
Mat 16:18	Why "church"?
Mat 16:18-19	Peter as pope? (Matthew 16:18-19)
Mat 16:19	Binding and loosing (Matthew 16:19)
Mat 16:20-23	"Get behind me, Satan" (Matthew 16:20-23)
Mat 16:21 – 17:23	Son of man: suffering king (Matthew 16:21–17:23)
Mat 16:24-26	What are you living for? (Matthew 16:24-26)
Mat 16:27-28	Jesus' paradoxical path to power (Matthew 16:27-28)

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In preparation for next week, read Matthew 17–18.