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Matthew 16:13-20

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The Gospel according to Matthew is a Tale of Two Kings. On the one hand, Matthew presents to his readers Jesus as the true and rightful King. Jesus is the long-foretold Messiah, who comes to fulfill the destiny of Israel (and of all men and women) as a King under God the Father, faithfully ruling with goodness, justice and mercy. On the other hand, there's everyone else: Herod, Magi, Pharisees, Sadducees, Pilate, disciples, readers and all humanity. All of us were made in God's image as kings and queens. All of us were created to rule under God, but instead of honoring God as our sovereign, we chose to rebel against him. We became kings and queens in opposition to him.

When Jesus came into the world at Christmastime, he came to rule as the greater king. How then shall we respond to him? From the beginning, Matthew shows that there are only two options: either Herod's way, or the way of Magi. When Herod heard about Jesus, he was caught off guard and troubled. He was determined to remain in control, so he did everything in his power to try to kill Jesus. The Magi, on the other hand, had been watching and waiting for Jesus all their lives. When they saw his star, "they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy!" And when they finally met Jesus, they fell down before him and worshiped him, by pledging to him their allegiance, their possessions, and their future rule as redeemed images of God. Those are the two options—either Herod's way or the way of the Magi. Matthew's point, repeated again and again throughout his Gospel, is to put the question to us. Now that we have encountered Jesus, which way will we choose?

Fast forward to a key turning point in Matthew's story. In Matthew 16, Jesus put the question to his disciples in this way: *Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Mt 16:13)*

Jesus and his disciples had been together now for several years. They began following him because he proclaimed good news about the coming of God's Kingdom. Then wherever they went throughout Galilee, the disciples had seen the evidence. Jesus preached God's word with authority, unlike the other religious and political leaders in that day. Jesus had compassion on the poor and the marginalized. He calmed the storms, fed the hungry, banished the darkness, healed the sick, and raised the dead. Many of the ancient promises of a messiah king, as foretold centuries earlier by the prophets, appeared to be coming true in Jesus.

Yet why wasn't Jesus ruling? Why were the Romans still terrorizing and taxing them to death? And what about the Pharisees and scribes, whom Jesus and his disciples had encountered in the prior chapter? Why were they still feeding people lies when they should have been feeding them God's life-giving Word? Jesus had all the makings of a king, and yet he did not wield power over others in the ways that Herod and Caesar and the Pharisees did. Instead of concentrating power in himself, he gave it away. So Jesus remained something of a mystery, and they never spoke directly regarding his true identity—until now.

Matthew tells us in v 13 that Jesus had led the disciples to the district of Caesarea Philippi, about as far away from Jerusalem as you could get, both geographically and culturally, while also still remaining within the region. It was a predominantly Gentile area, known for its paganism. Here they could speak relatively privately, at some distance from the religious and political factions jostling against one another in 1st C Israel. And it's here that Jesus asked them (Matthew 16:13), "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

The disciples responded (16:14) with a variety of possibilities, all under the broad umbrella of "prophet." Modern readers often think of prophets as these antisocial doomsday figures, but they were in fact a lot more like press secretaries. Prophets were really God's emissaries to the nations, especially government leaders, to inform and remind them of God's expectations for how they should govern. Certainly Jesus had a prophetic presence wherever he went, as he often spoke truth to power. Yet to regard him simply as a prophet was wholly inadequate, as he hoped that his disciples understood.

So Jesus asked them in v. 15, "What about you? Who do you say that I am?" And Simon Peter responded, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

To our ears, "Christ" and "Son of God" sound very religious. Peter, however, was talking politics. "Christ" in Greek, or "Messiah" in Hebrew, means "The Anointed One." It was a title used to describe someone who had been 'anointed' to rule. In the ancient Middle East, kings were enthroned by anointing, and over time they began wearing headbands featuring a diadem as a sign of their anointing. Those jeweled headbands were the precursor to the royal crowns of more recent centuries. Peter called Jesus the Christ because he saw God's kingdom coming through Jesus, and he anticipated that Jesus would be anointed as king.

What about the other title Peter gave to Jesus, the "Son of the living God?" In every Middle Eastern country in the ancient world, the king was understood to be the adopted son of the nation's god. After all, how could anyone become king unless his god adopted him and made it so? So the Pharaoh in Egypt was king because he was the son of Ra. The King of Moab was the son of Chemosh. The King in Gaza was the son of Dagon. And when David became king over all Israel, what was he called?

*The Lord said to me, "You are my Son; this day have I begotten you. Ask of me, and I will give you the nations for your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for your possession." (Ps 2:7-8)*

If Peter had lived during King David's reign, and David had asked him, "Who do you say that I am?" no one would have thought Peter sacrilegious if he had replied, "You are the Son of the Living God." When Peter said this about Jesus, the other disciples understood that Peter was making a political statement. Peter was recognizing Jesus as the King.

Up until this point in the story, whenever Jesus' true identity became apparent, Jesus would act to keep it hidden. Before Jesus could be enthroned as the Messiah King, there was another strand of Old Testament prophecy that he first had to fulfill, as Israel's suffering servant exiled on a cross. So in v 20 Jesus will charge his disciples to tell no one that he is the Christ. Yet in v 17 Jesus didn't scold Peter for what he had said, nor did Jesus disagree with Peter's confession. On the contrary, Jesus blessed Peter:

*"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. (16:17)*

After years of schooling, it's a natural reflex for us to imagine Jesus as the teacher, and Peter as the student who finally gets it. We might replace Jesus' words here with, "Good thinking, Peter!" But that's not what Jesus said, is it? There's more to Jesus' words than a simple "attaboy, Peter!" In the last chapter, Jesus condemned the Pharisees and scribes for false teaching that undermined God's word. Jesus called the Pharisees blind guides, and he warned the disciples to beware of their leaven. Because of these blind guides, people weren't connecting with God or hearing from God.

Jesus came announcing the Kingdom of God, which was not primarily about dying and going to heaven someday in the future. Rather, Jesus' focus was on reconnecting heaven and earth now, in the present, so that we might connect with God, as we were created to do.

What Jesus said to Peter in v 17 wasn't "Good thinking, Peter" but "My Father in heaven revealed that confession to you." The Pharisees had been speaking lies. They were blind guides, keeping people from hearing from God. But Jesus had come, and through him God's heavenly kingdom had begun to colonize the earth. By virtue of his connection to Jesus, Peter had become like Jesus: a mouthpiece for God the Father. God revealed his truth to Peter, and Peter made it his confession. This was yet another sign that the kingdom of God was at hand.

Jesus was so delighted with Peter's confession that he shared something new with his disciples in v 18:

*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (16:18)*

The first time Jesus explicitly mentioned the church is here in v 18. We can look back and see that Jesus had been talking about the church all along through the Sermon on the Mount and throughout much of his other teaching. But he didn't call it the church until now.

Why do you think that was? What was it about Peter's confession that prompted Jesus to reveal to his disciples his plans for the church?

It's because Peter's confession was foundational for the church, the heavenly colony that Jesus would establish here on earth. Simon Son of Jonah had correctly identified Jesus as his King. As a result, King Jesus granted his subject a title. Jesus dubbed him Sir *Peter*, which means "bedrock, a solid stone foundation."

Peter, as we shall see again and again, was not a very solid rock. In the very next episode, he will try to convince Jesus to follow him rather than the other way around. And on the night of Jesus' arrest, Peter will disavow Jesus three times. So it's pretty clear from Matthew's larger narrative that Jesus did not intend to build his church specifically on Peter. Also, here in v 18, Jesus didn't say "On you, Peter, I will build my church." Rather, he said, "On this rock I will build my church." The whole thing is a play on words, built on the foundation not of Peter himself, but on Peter's confession of Jesus as king.

Earlier, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke of a wise man who built his house on bedrock, as opposed to a fool who built a house on the sand. With Peter's confession of Jesus as king, Jesus set to work building God's house, his Church, on bedrock rather than sand. From that day all the way until today, the bedrock foundation for the Church is the confession of Jesus as King.

We have been taught all our lives to keep politics and religion separate, but in the Bible they're inseparable. In order to become Christians, we must confess Jesus as our king. Furthermore, not only is this the confession of all who join Jesus' church, but it's also the center of our life together after we joining. "Living with Jesus as our king" is a great way to summarize all that we do together, whether worship or discipleship, community or mission. These are all ways of following Jesus as our King.

When Jesus likened Peter's confession to a rock, he wasn't hearkening back only to the wise builder in the Sermon on the Mount. In the Old Testament, it is God the Father who is the original rock. Moses praised God as the Rock who is perfect, and all his ways are just (Deut 32:4). Hannah said that there is no rock like our God (1 Sam 2:2). And 24 times in the Psalms, God is praised for being a rock in which to find shelter and refuge.

So what is it, then, that makes Peter's confession so rock solid? In the New Testament, Jesus is the stone which the builders rejected, who becomes the chief cornerstone for the new temple, the house of God. Jesus, the Son of God, is the rock. When we confess him as king, we become living stones in the church, the eternal house of God.

The church built on the confession of Jesus as king is so rock solid, says Jesus in v 18, that the gates of hell will not prevail against it. What other institution can compare to the church? Here we are in the capital city of what is arguably the most powerful government in the world, yet it struggles to do its job, much less control the wind and the waves, heal diseases, forgive sins and raise the dead.

The church built on the foundation of Jesus as King is infinitely more powerful than any government, even ours. Nothing is too difficult for the church with Jesus at the center. Not even the gates of hell can prevail against it.

And think what a difference it makes to have Jesus as King. There is no politician like him. Never a broken campaign promise. No spin. No lies. Jesus' word is truth. He always does just what he promised, no matter how costly it might be politically or personally. Jesus loves his constituents like no other. No leader has ever represented his people more sacrificially. On the cross, where the government brutally executed him for crimes he didn't commit, Jesus gave himself for the sake of the world. But God the Father raised Jesus from the dead, and anointed him as the rightful king over all the earth. Jesus now sits enthroned at God's right hand on high, and he shall reign forever and ever. He is therefore called prince of peace, and Lord of Lords, and King of Kings. He's all that we've ever hoped for in a leader.

Being a Christian then, involves leaving behind your house on the sand, and making the same solid-rock confession that Peter did. Peter quit hoping for redemption through Herod or Caesar or the Pharisees or the Sadducees, and he claimed Jesus as his king. It's the same today. Being a Christian is not so much about accepting Jesus into your heart as it is making him King over your entire life. Jesus is Lord. He deserves your full allegiance.

King Herod refused to make Jesus his king and instead tried to put him to death. The Wise Men, on the other hand, worshiped him in at least three ways. They fell down before him, pledging him their allegiance. They also brought him precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, pledging to him their possessions. And they began to rule under Jesus as redeemed images of God. Instead of obeying Herod, they returned a different way. It was a sign of their pledge to rule as ambassadors of King Jesus when they returned to their own kingdoms.

That's what Jesus is talking about in v 19 when he says:

*"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven" (16:19)*

What in the world was Jesus talking about? What does he mean by binding and loosing? Isn't this what Jesus was supposed to be doing? Wasn't he the one who was to bind the strong man and plunder his house? Wasn't Jesus the one who was to proclaim the year of Jubilee and set the captives free? Yes. And so will all those who make common confession with Peter by claiming Jesus as their king.

What Jesus was saying with his talk about binding and loosing was simply another way of describing our role in God's heavenly kingdom's colonization of earth. When we make Jesus our king, he sends us out as his royal ambassadors, as kings and queens ruling under him within the kingdom of God.

Jesus is a king, but not like Herod or Pilate or Caesar. Instead of concentrating power in himself, he gives it away. And so his kingdom comes, and his will is done, on earth as in heaven, through those who confess him as king. We become his delegates. In the power of the Spirit, we bind and loose on his behalf.

Here's how this works: As followers of Jesus, we're each given some jurisdiction, some sphere of responsibility, which includes our relationships, and possessions, and place, and work, and so on. We are royal ambassadors of God's kingdom within that sphere of influence and responsibility. Wherever we find the powers of darkness at work against God's kingdom, it is our responsibility to bind them, through our words and actions as well as our prayers. And wherever we find people in bondage of any kind, it is our responsibility to release them by inviting them to join in our common confession of Jesus as king. We forgive and pardon in Jesus' name. We baptize and disciple. We bless and heal and release in the service of King Jesus.

Isn't this great news? Listen, we are surrounded by people who have come to define themselves by their political identities. Our neighbors who define themselves as Democrats, or Libertarians, or Republicans, or Socialists, or White Nationalists have no hope apart from seeing their tribe come into political power. If they're not already frustrated and disappointed and angry, they will be. They live in houses built on the sand.

Into this unstable and unhappy world King Jesus sends his church, i.e. those who have come to define themselves by a different identity, as loyalists to the King. Jesus is neither surprised nor worried about the current political climate in our country. In fact, he has known all along that it would be this way. So he rescues us from death, and he forms us together into loving communities like this one, so that by growing in community we might become an embassy of God's kingdom here, for the life of the world.

There's a popular myth that the church is bad—bad for us as individuals, and especially bad for society as a whole. And this mythology has become so widespread that Christians often feel apologetic about the church. But if we were to gather up all the crusades and papal indulgences and Joel Osteen hucksters, and consider them in light of the overall impact the church has had on the world, we would still find that our very real failures are a minor note in history. Overall, so many of the sad things that have come untrue in our world wouldn't have happened without the church. E.g. hospitals and schools, things like prison reform and the abolition of slavery and other efforts to promote human dignity and human rights, curbs on infanticide and abortion and incest and so many other evils. Imagine what this city would be like if there were no churches here.

I can say without a doubt that no other event or experience or institution has had a greater impact on my life than the church. Any success or achievement in my life stems from the matrix of love and peace and stability and hope and sense of purpose that comes from knowing King Jesus and growing in community within his church. I wish everyone in our world could have the same experience. That's why Jesus has commissioned us as his royal ambassadors. The same question Jesus asked on the road to Caesarea Philippi, we take to the world, inviting all women and men to join us in the common confession of Jesus as our King.