

**OS 21a SUNDAY BETWEEN 21 AND 27 AUGUST:
SERMON FOR THE DIOCESE OF BUNBURY 23/8/2026: GEOFF CHADWICK:
CAESAREA-PHILIPPI**

Matthew 16.13-20

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.

There’s a little bit of assumed knowledge in today’s Gospel reading. Matthew mentions Caesarea-Philippi, and the first hearers would have known exactly what this meant. We westerners, some 2000 years later probably don’t get the reference.

It’s a bit like saying “*When they reached Sydney Harbour*” – without any further description.

We Aussies however, would imagine the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Opera House etc.

Anyway, back to Caesarea-Philippi.

Caesarea-Philippi, was renowned for a cliff face and grotto just out of the city. Built into this face were shrines to the Roman gods, Pan, Zeus and Nemesis along with a white marble temple dedicated to Caesar Augustus.

Just in case you’re wondering:

Pan was the god of the wild, shepherds and flocks. Pan pipes are associated with him because they were commonly played by shepherds.

In Roman mythology *Zeus* is the king of the gods and the ruler of the sky, thunder, and lightning. The Greeks called him Jupiter.

Nemesis was the ancient Graeco-Roman goddess of divine retribution, righteous anger, and the balancing of fate. She was considered the force against human hubris.

Caesar Augustus was the first Roman emperor (27 BC- AD14), who although human, was deified by the Roman Senate after his death in AD14. Caesar described himself as the “*son of the deified*” after his father Julius Caesar was declared a god after his death. It was Augustus who began the Ceasar cult.

So with this in mind, and with the possibility that Jesus and the disciples were in view of these shrines, Jesus asks the question:

Who do people say that the Son of Man is? (Mtt 16:13, NRSV)

Now the first hearers of Matthew’s Gospel might have expected comparisons with the gentile gods Pan, Zues, Nemesis and Augustis.

But No, Matthew is writing for the Jewish Christians and presents a very Jewish answer:

‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. (Mtt 16:14, NRSV)

Pressing the matter further Jesus turns the question into a personal one:

‘But who do you say that I am? (Mtt 16:15, NRSV)

Imagine this, you’ve got, Pan, Zeus, Augustus, John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets as possible answers. Remember the shrines are presenting themselves. But Simon, the Jewish fisherman blurts out:

‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ (Matt 16:16)

With all manner of answers laid out before him. Peter proclaims something new, profound and unexpected!

Simon gets praised for his answer, and in the process gets given a new name and a new job!

Jesus says:

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. (Mtt 16:18, NRSV)

I wonder if there is a comparison here between the rock on which the pagan shrines were built and the rock that Peter is to become? It’s just a thought, but I think it is a powerful

image. It's a challenge to the idol worshiping pagans to give up their dead rock idols (not to be confused with Freddie Mercury) and to choose the new and living God, found in Jesus as proclaimed by Peter.

The encounter also accounts for Simon's change of name. The early Christians would have been wondering why the one they knew as Simon suddenly became Peter.

The answer is given. Jesus changed his name and at the same time changed his character!

The Jewish Christians would have understood this, by recognising that many biblical characters had their name changed. (Abram to Abraham, Sari to Sarah, Jacob to Israel and so on.)

Perhaps you've noted that today's passage is a little "mini-gospel" of the Gospel. The account tells the story of the first conversions in the early church.

It goes like this:

- 1) The early Gentile Christians had been worshippers of Pan, Nemesis, Zeus and the like.
- 2) The early Jewish converts had been waiting for a Messiah or the return of Elijah.
- 3) The disciples (personified by Peter) proclaim that Jesus is *the Messiah the Son of the Living God* (Mtt 16:16).

This is a direct challenge to the Cesar cult that worshiped the *son of a deceased god*!

- 4) On recognising Jesus as Messiah, the new converts would have been baptised and given a new name. Their former name would be given up for a Christian name.

Even today in our baptism service we ask the parents to *name their child*.

- 5) At baptism the new convert would be commissioned to work for the advancement of the kingdom of heaven. A kingdom which, despite its fragile appearance, is the one where ... *the gates of Hades will not prevail against it* (Mtt 16:18, NRSV).

So I wonder if you've experienced this "mini-gospel" in your own life story?

Have you been a worshipper of deceased gods? (Maybe fortune, fame, or power?)

Have you longed for some messiah or prophet to come and clean up the mess of your life?

Have you had a Simon experience? A moment or even series of moments when you've come to realise that Jesus is the Son of the living God? You've realised that he's the real deal; not some dead idol of the past, but the one who invigorates your very being?

Has your name been changed, or at least your character? Somehow, in knowing Jesus, God's spirit has made you new and given you a new purpose?

Have you come to realise, that despite the often fragile nature of the church – this band of people who follow Jesus, are part of the kingdom where the *gates of Hades will not prevail against it*?! (Mtt 16:18)

Most of us have had a "mini-gospel" experience, yet none of us have had the same one! No two people come to faith exactly the same way!

Nevertheless, our proclamation is the same:

‘[Jesus is] *the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*’ Mtt 16:16, NRSV)

We can all put Caesarea-Philippi behind us!

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.