

“The question, the answer and the promise” Mt 16:13-20

“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 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. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

For our meditations today we have a real treat. One of these really, really important and also encouraging events, where Jesus engages with His disciples, and what He asks and what He promises is as important for us today as it was for His disciples back then.

I invite you today to reflect on three things: on the question, on the answer and on the promise. The question, the answer and the promise. What was the question, and why is it still important for us today?

Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” What would you say if you were asked the same question? I would hope that we all know what the true answer is, but not everyone else knows it.

If you asked people this question, you would get different answers. Almost everyone in the world has heard the name of Jesus. However, the sad thing is that even among those who identify as Christians there is a great deal of misunderstanding. So, why would it matter?

Because how we answer this question, determines how we understand what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, what the Church is about, and it will set certain priorities for our Christian lives.

For example, one of the most widespread misunderstandings is that Jesus was a great teacher of humanity. Sure, He was a great teacher. But if that is all who He was, then what would that mean for His followers?

Then His followers would be simply people, who try to lead good, moral lives, following Jesus instructions and example. Then the Church, indeed, should be understood as a community of well-behaved, good and moral people.

And that’s all, and if you have learned Jesus’ teachings, and can be a moral person on your own, then why in the world would you need the Church? Then

you could be a good Christian on your own. Many think this way. Then they don't want anyone to preach at them... And why would they try to make someone else Jesus' disciple? To teach them how to behave? Strange...

Another misunderstanding, and this is increasingly widespread in those churches, which listen to the world much more than they listen to the Word of God – that Jesus was a social warrior, a champion for social justice.

Jesus most certainly stood for justice for everyone, but if He was only a social justice revolutionary, then what does that mean for His followers? Then the main focus for His followers should be engaging in social justice issues.

That is a good thing – to care for poor and marginalized, and to be generous with those in need, and to stand against any sort of oppression and injustice, that far we all should be on board. But recently this championing for social justice has taken really strange turns, where whatever the world promotes are assumed to be the right things to champion.

Be it sexual promiscuity under the guise of freedom, or the destruction of the institution of marriage and family under the banner of equality. Or even the rebellion against our created bodies as in transgenderism ideology. Then the Church becomes one more activist organization fighting for the latest fad.

As you see, the way we answer this question determines a lot. It actually determines much more than we at first realize, and we will look at it in a minute. Now, the answer. The true answer to the question – who is Jesus?

Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Yes, yes, that is right! The Son of the living God, true man and also true God. The Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One, the One who was promised from the beginning of time, the One who came to redeem us and to rescue us from under the power of Satan and sin and death.

The One who was anointed with the Holy Spirit so that as the Suffering Servant He would bear our iniquities and would take our place on the day of judgment. He came to give His life as a ransom for many.

To restore our relationships with the Holy God, by removing the guilt of our sin and by sending His Spirit to renew our hearts and to indwell in us. The Son of the living God, the One who at the end of the age will come in His divine glory to judge the living and the dead and whose Kingdom will have no end.

This is a very different answer. So different that we can't come up with it on our own. When someone says that Jesus was a great teacher, or that He was a champion of social justice, etc., those are the answers that we as fallen creatures can come up with, they seem sensible for us.

This one is different. No one can believe and confess that Jesus is the Son of the living God on their own. Something else needs to happen. Or rather – someone

else. As Jesus put it: “Blessed are you! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” Or as Jesus says elsewhere in John 6 that “no one can come to me, unless the Father draws them.”

Did you hear this?! If this is what you believe to be the right answer to the question “who is Jesus?”, then rejoice and be glad!

For God the Father Himself is drawing you to Himself. As Paul the apostle put it in 1 Corinthians that “no one can say that Jesus is the Lord, except in the power of the Holy Spirit”. Which means, that the Holy Spirit has indwelled in you and has united you with God the Father and the Son.

If this is how we answer the question, then we are set up for a very different understanding of the Church and of ourselves. Then we are not just a group of people who try to lead good lives. Sure, guided by the Holy Spirit we also try to live in a God-pleasing way that is good for our neighbours. But that is not all.

Then we are not just a group of social justice activists. Sure, guided by the Spirit we are moved to care for everyone in need and to stand for what is right and good and just, but those are simply the fruits of our Christian lives.

Who are we then? We are God’s own people, chosen by His grace, before the foundation of the world, rescued from under the power of Satan, brought into God’s own family, united with and embraced by the Holy Trinity.

Made brothers and sisters of Jesus, and co-heirs of God’s eternal Kingdom. We are a new creation, destined for eternal life and blessedness in the age to come, and sent as messengers of Jesus to bring yet others into this community of saints. This is who you are, and we live under the Father’s protection, and Jesus walks with us, and the Holy Spirit Himself keeps us in these new relationships.

This is the right answer and it comes together with the promise. This is God’s promise to you. It has three parts. “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” All these promises apply to us as well.

“On this rock I will build my Church”. The rock is the true faith and confession that Jesus is the Son of God. On this true faith Jesus builds His Church. Not on moral teachings, not on our good works, not on great music, not of friendly community, not on shared interests and hobbies, but on this confession.

“Jesus is our Lord.” We need to remember this when we consider how to strengthen, how to build up and grow our congregation. Not on what people like, not on what today’s culture demands, and not on anything else, whatever good and appealing it may seem, but only on this rock, on Jesus Christ.

If we try to build on something else, that is a waste of time, and what we are building then may be a nice and friendly community, but it won’t be the Church of the Son of the living God. And then we won’t have His promises either.

The next promise sounds a bit scary. And it is, and we should be scared. Not afraid, but just realistic about what we are dealing with. “The gates of hell shall not prevail against you.” But they most certainly will try.

Jesus warns us repeatedly. It is not going to be easy. If we want to be His Church, and not just some comfortable and cosy human community, we will be under attack. Not just by bad neighbours.

The Church of Christ stands “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Eph 6). We should be a bit scared.

This is not an enemy that we can defeat. But we can rejoice in the promise, that if we hold to Jesus, if we are here to seek Him, if we pray and do our best to be faithful to Him, those evil powers and forces will not prevail.

They can’t possibly prevail as long as we confess that Jesus is the Son of the living God. For we do it in the power of the Holy Spirit, and where the Holy Spirit dwells, the whole Trinity is present. And God the Father is greater than all, and no one can snatch you from His hand (John 10).

Finally, Jesus “will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” You know how the keys work. If something is locked, you can’t get in, and only the one who has the right key can open the door. That person may be the most ordinary person, just as we are, but if they have the keys, they can open the doors.

You have the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven – the Gospel about Jesus Christ, about how He came to us, who were dead in our sins, how He took our place and suffered for our transgressions, and how He now freely offers His forgiveness and peace with God and a place in His Kingdom... to everyone.

You have the keys, and with these keys, if only you use them, if you tell this Good News, you can open the Kingdom and let people in. That is a great power and a great privilege that is entrusted to us. And this is why the last verse from our reading doesn’t apply to us anymore. Remember what was it?

Then Jesus “strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that He was the Christ.” We may wish that He commanded this to us. Perhaps it would be easier. But then we couldn’t experience the thrill and joy and excitement of proclaiming the words of eternal life to others. To us Jesus has given different command.

Go and make disciples from all nations! For you know who Jesus is and you have received not only His promises, but His own Spirit. Now go and live as who God has made you, and let His blessing flow through you abundantly.

Amen.