

Historic Commentary

(Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Matthew 16:13-20 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Matthew 16](#), from a 13th century document called the *Catena Aurea* that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Chrysostom](#): Then, since they said, “Some John the Baptist, some Elijah, some Jeremiah, or one of the prophets,” and set forth their mistaken opinion, he next added, “But who do you say that I am?” He was calling them on by his second inquiry to entertain some higher mental picture, indicating that their former judgment falls exceedingly short of his dignity. Thus Jesus probes for another judgment from them. He poses this second question that they might not fall in with the multitude who, because they saw his miracles as greater than human, accounted him a man indeed but one that, as Herod had thought, may have appeared after a resurrection. To lead them away from such notions, he says, “But who do you say that I am?”—that is, you who are always with me, and see me working miracles and have yourselves done many mighty works by me.

[Cyril of Alexandria](#): Peter did not say “you are a Christ” or “a son of God” but “the Christ, the Son of God.” For there are many christs by grace, who have attained the rank of adoption [as sons], but [there is] only one who is by nature the Son of God. Thus, using the definite article, he said, the Christ, the Son of God. And in calling him Son of the living God, Peter indicates that Christ himself is life and that death has no authority over him. And even if the flesh, for a short while, was weak and died, nevertheless it rose again, since the Word, who indwelled it, could not be held under the bonds of death.

[Epiphanius the Latin](#): For Christ is a rock which is never disturbed or worn away. Therefore Peter gladly received his name from Christ to signify the established and unshaken faith of the church.... The devil is the gateway of death who always hastens to stir up against the

holy church calamities and temptations and persecutions. But the faith of the apostle, which was founded upon the rock of Christ, abides always unconquered and unshaken. And the very keys of the kingdom of the heavens have been handed down so that one whom he has bound on earth has been bound in heaven, and one whom he has set free on earth he has also set free in heaven.

Chrysostom: And why did he charge them? That when the things which offend are taken out of the way, the cross is accomplished and the rest of his sufferings fulfilled, and when there is nothing any more to interrupt and disturb the faith of the people in him, the right opinion concerning him may be engraven pure and immovable in the mind of the hearers. For in truth his power had not yet clearly shone forth. Accordingly it was his will then to be preached by them when both the plain truth of the facts and the power of his deeds were pleading in support of the assertions of the apostles. For it was by no means the same thing to see him in Palestine, now working miracles and now insulted and persecuted, especially when the very cross was presently to follow the miracles that were happening, and then to behold him everywhere in the world, adored and believed, and no more suffering anything such as he had suffered.

Jerome: For the purpose of proclaiming, he had sent his disciples before him and ordered them to announce his arrival. But he advised them lest they say publicly that he was Jesus Christ. It seems to me to be one thing to proclaim him to be Christ, another thing to proclaim him to be Jesus Christ. Christ is a common term for the messianic dignity, while Jesus is the proper name for the Savior. It is possible that for this reason he had been unwilling to be proclaimed Jesus Christ prior to his suffering and resurrection in order that he might afterwards, when the obligation of blood had been fulfilled, at an opportune time say to his apostles, "Go and teach all nations" and the rest. And lest anyone think that this is merely our opinion and not the perceptions of the Evangelist, then what follows explains further the reasons for the prohibited proclamation.

John Calvin: Vs 14. Some [say,] John the Baptist. This inquiry does not relate to the open enemies of Christ, nor to ungodly scoffers, but to the sounder and better part of the people, who might be called the choice and flower of the Church. Those only are mentioned by the disciples who spoke of Christ with respect; and yet, though they aimed at the truth, not one of them reaches that point, but all go astray in their vain fancies. Hence we perceive how great is the weakness of the human mind; for not only is it unable

of itself to understand what is right or true, but even out of true principles it coins errors. Besides, though Christ is the only standard of harmony and peace, by which God gathers the whole world to himself, the greater part of men seize on this subject as the occasion of prolonged strife.

Vs 15. But who do you say that I am?

Here Christ distinguishes his disciples from the rest of the crowd, to make it more fully evident that, whatever differences may exist among others, we at least ought not to be led aside from the unity of faith. They who shall honestly submit to Christ, and shall not attempt to mix with the Gospel any inventions of their own brain, will never want the true light. But here the greatest vigilance is necessary, that, though the whole world may be carried away by its own inventions, believers may continually adhere to Christ.

Vs 16. Thou art the Christ.

The confession is short, but it embraces all that is contained in our salvation; for the designation Christ, or Anointed, includes both an everlasting Kingdom and an everlasting Priesthood, to reconcile us to God, and, by expiating our sins through his sacrifice, to obtain for us a perfect righteousness, and, having received us under his protection, to uphold and supply and enrich us with every description of blessings. Mark says only, Thou art the Christ. Luke says, Thou art the Christ of God But the meaning is the same; for the Christs (χριστοί) of God was the appellation anciently bestowed on kings, who had been anointed by the divine command. And this phrase had been previously employed by Luke, (2:26,) when he said that Simeon had been informed by a revelation from heaven that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ For the redemption, which God manifested by the hand of his Son, was clearly divine; and therefore it was necessary that he who was to be the Redeemer should come from heaven, bearing the impress of the anointing of God. Matthew expresses it still more clearly, Thou art the Son of the living God; for, though Peter did not yet understand distinctly in what way Christ was the begotten of God, he was so fully persuaded of the dignity of Christ, that he believed him to come from God, not like other men, but by the inhabitation of the true and living Godhead in his flesh. When the attribute living is ascribed to God, it is for the purpose of distinguishing between Him and dead idols, who are nothing, (1 Corinthians 8:4.)

Vs 17. Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jona.

As this is life eternal, to know the only true God, and him whom he hath sent, Jesus

Christ, (John 17:3,) Christ justly pronounces him to be blessed who has honestly made such a confession. This was not spoken in a peculiar manner to Peter alone, but our Lord's purpose was, to show in what the only happiness of the whole world consists. That every one may approach him with greater courage, we must first learn that all are by nature miserable and accursed, till they find a remedy in Christ. Next, we must add, that whoever has obtained Christ wants nothing that is necessary to perfect happiness, since we have no right to desire any thing better than the eternal glory of God, of which Christ puts us in possession.

Flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee.

In the person of one man Christ reminds all that we must ask faith from the Father, and acknowledge it to the praise of his grace; for the special illumination of God is here contrasted with flesh and blood. Hence we infer, that the minds of men are destitute of that sagacity which is necessary for perceiving the mysteries of heavenly wisdom which are hidden in Christ; and even that all the senses of men are deficient in this respect, till God opens our eyes to perceive his glory in Christ. Let no man, therefore, in proud reliance on his own abilities, attempt to reach it, but let us humbly suffer ourselves to be inwardly taught by the Father of Lights, (James 1:17,) that his Spirit alone may enlighten our darkness. And let those who have received faith, acknowledging the blindness which was natural to them, learn to render to God the glory that is due to Him.

Vs 18. And I say to thee.

By these words Christ declares how highly he is delighted with the confession of Peter, since he bestows upon it so large a reward. For, though he had already given to his disciple, Simon, the name of Peter, (Matthew 10:2; John 1:42,) and had, out of his undeserved goodness, appointed him to be an apostle, yet these gifts, though freely bestowed, are here ascribed to faith as if they had been a reward, which we not infrequently find in Scripture. Peter receives a twofold honor, the former part of which relates to his personal advantage, and the latter to his office as an Apostle.

Thou art Peter. By these words our Lord assures him that it was not without a good reason that he had formerly given him this name, because, as a living stone (1 Peter 2:5) in the temple of God, he retains his steadfastness. This extends, no doubt, to all believers, each of whom is a temple of God, (1 Corinthians 6:19,) and who, united to each other by faith, make together one temple, (Ephesians 2:21.) But it denotes also the distinguished

excellence of Peter above the rest, as each in his own order receives more or less, according to the measure of the gift of Christ, (Ephesians 4:7.)

And on this rock.

Hence it is evident how the name Peter comes to be applied both to Simon individually, and to other believers. It is because they are founded on the faith of Christ, and joined together, by a holy consent, into a spiritual building, that God may dwell in the midst of them, (Ezekiel 43:7.) For Christ, by announcing that this would be the common foundation of the whole Church, intended to associate with Peter all the godly that would ever exist in the world. “You are now,” said he, “a very small number of men, and therefore the confession which you have now made is not at present supposed to have much weight; but ere long a time will arrive when that confession shall assume a lofty character, and shall be much more widely spread.” And this was eminently fitted to excite his disciples to perseverance, that though their faith was little known and little esteemed, yet they had been chosen by the Lord as the first-fruits, that out of this mean commencement there might arise a new Church, which would prove victorious against all the machinations of hell.

Shall not prevail against it.

The pronoun it (αὐτῷ) may refer either to faith or to the Church; but the latter meaning is more appropriate. Against all the power of Satan the firmness of the Church will prove to be invincible, because the truth of God, on which the faith of the Church rests, will ever remain unshaken. And to this statement corresponds that saying of John,

This is the victory which overcometh the world, your faith, (1 John 5:4.) It is a promise which eminently deserves our observation, that all who are united to Christ, and acknowledge him to be Christ and Mediator, will remain to the end safe from all danger; for what is said of the body of the Church belongs to each of its members, since they are one in Christ. Yet this passage also instructs us, that so long as the Church shall continue to be a pilgrim on the earth, she will never enjoy rest, but will be exposed to many attacks; for, when it is declared that Satan will not conquer, this implies that he will be her constant enemy. While, therefore, we rely on this promise of Christ, feel ourselves at liberty to boast against Satan, and already triumph by faith over all his forces; let us learn, on the other hand, that this promise is, as it were, the sound of a trumpet, calling us to be always ready and prepared for battle. By the word gates (πύλαι) is unquestionably

meant every kind of power and of weapons of war.

Vs 19. And I will give thee the keys

Here Christ begins now to speak of the public office, that is, of the Apostleship, which he dignifies with a twofold title. First, he says that the ministers of the Gospel are porters, so to speak, of the kingdom of heaven, because they carry its keys; and, secondly, he adds, that they are invested with a power of binding and loosing, which is ratified in heaven. The comparison of the keys is very properly applied to the office of teaching; as when Christ says (Luke 11:52) that the scribes and Pharisees, in like manner, have the key of the kingdom of heaven, because they are expounders of the law. We know that there is no other way in which the gate of life is opened to us than by the word of God; and hence it follows that the key is placed, as it were, in the hands of the ministers of the word.

Those who think that the word keys is here used in the plural number, because the Apostles received a commission not only to open but also to shut, have some probability on their side; but if any person choose to take a more simple view of the meaning, let him enjoy his own opinion. Here a question arises, Why does the Lord promise that he will give to Peter what he appeared to have formerly given him by making him an Apostle? But this question has been already answered, when I said that the twelve were at first (Matthew 10:5) nothing more than temporary preachers, and so, when they returned to Christ, they had executed their commission; but after that Christ had risen from the dead, they then began to be appointed to be ordinary teachers of the Church. It is in this sense that the honor is now bestowed for the future.

Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth. The second metaphor, or comparison, is intended directly to point out the forgiveness of sins; for Christ, in delivering us, by his Gospel, from the condemnation of eternal death, looses the cords of the curse by which we are held bound. The doctrine of the Gospel is, therefore, declared to be appointed for loosing our bonds, that, being loosed on earth by the voice and testimony of men, we may be actually loosed in heaven. But as there are many who not only are guilty of wickedly rejecting the deliverance that is offered to them, but by their obstinacy bring down on themselves a heavier judgment, the power and authority to bind is likewise granted to the ministers of the Gospel. It must be observed, however, that this does not belong to the nature of the Gospel, but is accidental; as Paul also informs us, when, speaking of the

vengeance which he tells us that he has it in his power to execute against all unbelievers and rebels, he immediately adds,

When your obedience shall have been fulfilled, (2 Corinthians 10:6.) For were it not that the reprobate, through their own fault, turn life into death, the Gospel would be to all the power of God to salvation, (Romans 1:16;) but as many persons no sooner hear it than their impiety openly breaks out, and provokes against them more and more the wrath of God, to such persons its savor must be deadly, (2 Corinthians 2:16.) The substance of this statement is, that Christ intended to assure his followers of the salvation promised to them in the Gospel, that they might expect it as firmly as if he were himself to descend from heaven to bear testimony concerning it; and, on the other hand, to strike despisers with terror, that they might not expect their mockery of the ministers of the word to remain unpunished. Both are exceedingly necessary; for the inestimable treasure of life is exhibited to us in earthen vessels, (2 Corinthians 4:7,) and had not the authority of the doctrine been established in this manner, the faith of it would have been, almost every moment, ready to give way. The reason why the ungodly become so daring and presumptuous is, that they imagine they have to deal with men. Christ therefore declares that, by the preaching of the Gospel, is revealed on the earth what will be the heavenly judgment of God, and that the certainty of life or death is not to be obtained from any other source.

This is a great honor, that we are God's messengers to assure the world of its salvation. It is the highest honor conferred on the Gospel, that it is declared to be the embassy of mutual reconciliation between God and men, (2 Corinthians 5:20.) In a word, it is a wonderful consolation to devout minds to know that the message of salvation brought to them by a poor mortal man is ratified before God. Meanwhile, let the ungodly ridicule, as they may think fit, the doctrine which is preached to them by the command of God, they will one day learn with what truth and seriousness God threatened them by the mouth of men. Finally, let pious teachers, resting on this assurance, encourage themselves and others to defend with boldness the life-giving grace of God, and yet let them not the less boldly thunder against the hardened despisers of their doctrine.