

Sermon preached at OCC, 27 August 2023

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life! Help us now to hear and obey what you say to us today. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Matthew 16:13-20

Who do you say that I am?

This is one of the iconographies of the Byzantine period that depicts *The Anastasis* - Resurrection. The image is a 13th-century mosaic in St. Mark's Basilica in Venice. Venice was still under the power of Constantinople - the centre of Eastern Christianity. As Christians who live under the influence of Western Christianity – especially the Reformed tradition, many of us may not pay much attention to iconographies of Eastern churches as such. This iconography is titled *The Anastasis*,¹ meaning raising up or rising. Christ's feet and hands bear the marks of the crucifixion nails, and he carries the cross by which he has earned salvation. Jesus grasps Adam by his limp wrist and takes him from his coffin, symbolizing 'death' into life. Eve waits behind, and behind her are a variety of Old Testament personages. On the right are the two kings, David and Solomon (in crowns) and John the Baptist (haloed and pointing to Christ). In the chasm beneath Christ's feet is a remarkable rendition of all he has conquered: the devil himself, now chained hand and foot; the gates of Hell; and a collection of keys. The keys most likely refer to Revelation 1:17-18, where Christ tells John, 'I am the first and the last, and the living one, I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.'

The Latin inscription reads,² 'And I will be the death [*mors*] of Death and leader of this surging cohort and the victor [*morsus*] over Hell, and I will give you the kingdom above.' Beneath the Latin inscription are the Greek words Η ΑΓΙΑ ΑΝΑΤΑΚΙΣ - 'The holy Resurrection.' The overall visual message clearly shows that the humanity represented by Adam contributes nothing to their salvation. God in Christ grabbed hold of human beings, saved us, and accomplished salvation and nothing else. This is a powerful visual statement of who Jesus is from the perspective of Eastern Christianity. In Matthew's passage, we see a chance to see who Jesus is before Christianity is divided into two different perspectives through two questions, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" and then 'Who do you say that I am?'³

¹ ἀνάστασις, ἀναστάσεως, ἡ (ἀνίστημι); 1. a raising up, rising (e. g. from a seat): Luke 2:34; John 11:25 etc.

² MORS ET ERO MORTIS SURGENTUM DUXQUE COHORTIS MORSUS ET INFERNO VOS REGNO DONO SUPERNO
<https://www.christianiconography.info/Edited%20in%202013/Italy/anastasisStMarks.html>

³ Matthew 16:13 and 15

Jesus' identity through the dead prophets

People began to identify Jesus through John the Baptist⁴, Elijah, Jeremiah or other prophets who were once great but now all dead. When Herod killed John, Jesus was rejected by people in his hometown, who couldn't see the power of God in him but in his humble origin – Mary's son. Elijah was a mighty prophet during a turbulent time in Israel's history. The nation had turned away from the Lord (YHWH) to worship Baal, and King Ahab allied with Sidon by marrying their princess, Jezebel. The incident in Naboth's vineyard⁵ was one of the examples that King Ahab, with the queen Jezebel, did evil before God. Elijah tried to show Israel the evil of their ways and encourage them to return to the Lord. As a prophet, Jeremiah pronounced God's judgment upon the people of his time for their wickedness. He was concerned primarily with false and insincere worship and failure to trust YHWH in national affairs. He denounced social injustices, too. Now they are all dead. What it shows us is that people disagree on who Jesus is. The disciples, especially those who witnessed John the Baptist who baptized Jesus, know that Jesus is not John the Baptist.⁶ Also, for Peter, James and John, who were with Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration,⁷ they know Jesus is not Elijah. So, who do we say Jesus is?

Jesus' identity through the living God

When Jesus asks, 'Who do you say I am?' the disciples are silent except Simon Peter, who says, 'You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.' Jesus tells Peter's answer was not from human beings but from God. Jesus blesses Simon, calls him Peter (*Petros*: masculine noun), and says, 'On this rock (*Petra*: feminine noun) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.'⁸ Although it may be Peter with other disciples who listen to Jesus, the rock is not Peter but presumably indicating a place/space where Jesus stands to proclaim this. The disciples who see Jesus before them and hear Peter's answer about the son of the living God may not fully understand what it means. Yet a living God is not static but actively works in and through God's chosen people. God never ceases to exist and to create and to anoint. Jesus is the Messiah and the son of the living God, which means that God continues to speak and to act. Jesus also promises Peter the keys of the kingdom of heavens by which whatever he should imprison on the earth will be bound in the heavens, and whatever he should set free on earth

⁴ The death of John the Baptist in Matthew 14:1-12

⁵ 1 Kings 21

⁶ Matthew 3:13-17

⁷ Matthew 17:1-13

⁸ καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτῃ **τῇ πέτρᾳ** οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ πύλαι ᾄδου οὐ κατισχύσουσιν αὐτῆς.

will be released in the heavens. What we do on earth matters, and it impacts the heavens and the environment around us.

The question, 'Who do you say that I am?' is still valid. As followers of Jesus, everything we do and live by is hanging on to this question. How we identify Jesus should be based on our personal encounters with God through the sacred text, in dialogue with others, and activities in the community. It is through a lifelong conversation with God. Let's look at *The Anastasis* again. Is it the same one you saw before, or do you begin to see something new and different? Who do you say that Jesus is?