

Who do you say I am?

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on August 23rd, 2026 – Matthew 16:1-20)

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I am a female Baptist minister. I am also a grand-daughter, daughter, sister, cousin, niece and god-mother. I am a knitter, a crocheter and card maker. I have been a tutor, a public servant, chaplain and a tennis player and volleyballer.

How would you describe yourself? Who do you say that you are? Would you describe yourself by your job, by your hobbies, by your relationships, by your politics or by your faith.

Jesus, in John's gospel, describes himself in a number of ways.

I am the bread of life - I am the one who sustains.

I am the light of the world - I am the one who dispels the darkness.

I am the gate - I am the one who opens the door and welcomes people in and provides safety and shelter for them.

I am the Good Shepherd - I am the one who cares, guides and offers rest.

I am the Resurrection and the life - I am the one who imparts vitality.

I am the way, the truth and the life - I show you the way, lead you from unnecessary distractions.

I am the true vine - I am deeply connected to you, providing your life source, enabling your growth.

In the story we have before us, Jesus asks his disciples who people were saying he was. A fairly safe question, it just required them to tell Jesus what they were observing. So, their answer was to describe Jesus in relation to the other greats in the faith. Jesus then drills down further and asks a more personal question, a more probing question, a more dangerous question. He says, okay that's who others say I am, I want you now to tell me who do **you** say that I am.

Peter's response was quite profound.

You are the Messiah. The Messiah was the one for whom the people in Jesus' time hoped and prayed for.

You are the Son of the Living God. You are deeply connected with God, you share his DNA, this was radical, this was controversial.

Did Peter really understand what he was saying? Did he know it actually meant great suffering and death? Did he know it meant putting everything on the line for all people?

And then Jesus gives him a task, to help build the church, to take care of the people, to shepherd them.

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People have many answers to this question of Jesus. Some say a healer, some a prophet, some a radical rabble rouser, some a wonder worker, some a disrupter, some a really good teacher, some incredibly wise and yes, some say he is the Messiah, the liberator, the one coming to save them from the oppressors

Jesus doesn't just pose this question to Peter and his disciples but also to us.

How would you answer this question? Who do you say that Jesus is?

How you answer this question matters, it will inform how you practice your faith, it will inform how you understand the world and your place in it, it will inform how you understand and treat others.

If I was asked, who do I say Jesus is, I would still go back to the same answer I gave many years ago to a group of Year 9 students at Carey Baptist when I was preaching at their chapel service. I would quote Jesus as in Luke 4, when he says he is the one who has come to proclaim freedom to the captives. My answer of course says much about me - at that point in my life I had spent most of it working for the Department of Justice in crime statistics, had spent many years doing volunteer work with young offenders and had done my Arts degree focussing on criminology and the criminal justice system. This statement made sense to me in a world where my focus was on those who were part of our prison system and how it didn't really rehabilitate them. Freedom for them was not about bars and prison walls, it was more about being viewed by others as being people of worth, about being understood, about being freed from dysfunctional families, addictions, poverty and so on. It was these things that Jesus and Christians could help with and in my understanding things my Christian faith called me to do. I have attempted to live my life in such a way to help free people from that which holds them captive.

Once we answer this question Jesus poses, we like Peter, are given a task too. Like Peter we are called to be the church in the world, to be the sign of God's continuing presence in the world. How might we go about this task?

First, we must acknowledge that how we answer Jesus' question will dictate how we participate in the life of the church and its ministry. I think it was Karl Barth who said - show me your Christ and I will show you who you are.

Paul in the letter to Romans gives us a bit of insight into how we might be that church.

1. We are individual members of the one church, the one body of Christ. We are in this together, together we are called to share God's love in the world.
2. We are each given gifts to go about the task of living out who we say Jesus is and therefore who we are. Some are called to teach, some to care, some to lead. We are all called to give what we can, to be compassionate and to be cheerful. Taking hold of these gifts and using them is how others will know who we think Jesus is and the difference he has made in our life.

And it goes further, as the church, as the body of Christ is this place, we too need to answer this question. Who do we say Christ is? If we say Jesus welcomes strangers - then we will open our doors to strangers. If we say Jesus cares for those on the margins

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of society - then we will care for those people. If we say Jesus breaks down barriers - then we will make sure no one is excluded. If we say Jesus stands up against the status quo as he supports those who are exploited and abused - then we will be their voice in the corridors of power.

Just who do you say Jesus is? Are you prepared to live out your answer?