

Guest Preacher - Rev. Calum Macdonald (Retired)

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Preacher: Rev. Calum Macdonald

[0 : 00] Shall we turn now to the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 16, and we'll read again verse 18.

! At this point in the experience of the Lord, it wouldn't be amiss to suggest that he is coming to a critical point in his ministry where things are about to turn.

There have always been those who treated the Lord's ministry, his message, and his works with interest, and some with appreciation, some with delight.

Always there are those who were opposed to what he taught. And who were suspicious of what he did. But the tide is about to turn where more and more are going to be antagonistic to the Lord.

And more and more will challenge what he has to say and what he is doing.

[1 : 57] But at this point, we haven't actually arrived at that negative relationship with the many.

There are still some who are, or many who are interested in discovering who he is in reality. They're wanting to find out whether this person is, as is alleged by some, the Messiah that they've been waiting for.

It's very hard for us to think of society that are geared towards the arrival of a Messiah or a Liberator.

Some would favour the Latter, given that they are under the heel of the oppressor.

The Roman authorities are there not by invitation. And they are very much a people that are under the cause as far as their lives are concerned.

[3 : 19] They're not happy with their lot. So, in a sense, there are many amongst them who are reactionaries and who are encouraging dissent.

And quite keen that the people would rise up to root themselves of the Roman heel of oppression. So, with that mindset, one way of encouraging that would be to remind them that there is, within the Scripture, a person that the Scripture holds out to them that will become a champion of the people. It's one way of interpreting the role of the Messiah. The Messiah will come and liberate them and bring the power that they have taken from them back into the hands of God's chosen people.

So, there is that sense in which there is an interest in Messianic doctrine and teaching.

[4 : 42] And for any to suggest that this Messiah might be Christ, would attract attention to Christ.

There are others, of course, who are more spiritually in tune with what the Bible teaches. And their understanding may differ from a purely secular understanding or an understanding that is less spiritual, less focused on what the role of the Messiah is actually going to be.

But having said all that, I suppose it helps us understand the questions that are asked by Jesus of the disciples leading up to this statement that we find in verse 18.

We read that Jesus speaks to the disciples and he asks them directly. He's asking the disciples this question, Who do people say that the Son of Man is?

He's not asking the question because he doesn't know what people are saying. But he brings that question to the forefront of what he has to tell them and what he wants them to understand.

[6 : 15] Who do people say that the Son of Man is? And the reply that is given is, Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and others Jeremiah are one of the prophets.

And that opens out the question to a more personal one and a more direct one. But who do you say that I am?

And Simon Peter answers on their behalf. And he says, With the help of God's Spirit, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

And Jesus tells us that this is the work of God's Spirit. Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

So that's the broad background and the immediate background to this verse that we're looking at this evening.

[7 : 23] Who do you say that I am? And the answer given by Peter and the response given by Jesus, not just to Peter, but to the disciples.

Remember, he is not just passing the time of day. He is instructing them. He is informing them. He is teaching them what they need to understand is true about himself and themselves.

Now, verse 18 is not an easy verse, I suppose, in many respects. It's a verse that's led many conversations down the road of controversy because of what it appears to be saying.

It's a verse that's central to a doctrinal understanding of the church that suggests that the church has one human head and that human head is not the Lord Jesus Christ.

That there is a headship of the church on earth that is other than the Lord Jesus. And we'll say something about that. But we want, first of all, to understand that what Christ is saying in these words, he is speaking of the church in the first place.

[9 : 00] He is, the words that he utters have to do with the church, his church. Secondly, we are reminded of the fact that it is his church.

Not our church, but his church. Not just the church, but the church of Christ. Not just the church. Not just the church. The third thing that we see here is that Jesus insists that this church has foundations. It is built on unshakable foundations.

And fourthly, the necessity of it being built on these unshakable foundations. That the church, by its very nature, will always experience challenge.

The nature of the church, because of whose church it is, will find the church always tested and tried.

[10 : 15] As long as the church is a church that is found in the world. There will be a day when the church no longer exists as a church that is in the world.

It will be a church that is glorified. A church that occupies a space, whatever like that space is, where every member of that church will be the redeemed, free from sin, constantly in the presence of Christ, free to worship him without fear or without any sense of what they're doing, being anything other than God honouring.

But before that comes the church exists in the world. And it has an experience of occupying the space that is the world and encountering the challenges that that experience involves them in. Christ is, for the first time, speaking about the church.

Twice in the Gospel of Matthew that he uses the word church, ecclesia. It's only twice that he uses it. Other occasions where he is referring to the church, he usually speaks of it in terms of the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven.

[12 : 02] And the meaning of the word church is usually understood to be an assembly or a gathering of people.

And another meaning which is placed alongside that is those who are the called out ones of God. And Jesus usually speaks of his kingdom as made up of those who are God's people, called by God to serve God here in this world.

Now, Israel of old was considered, or they considered themselves to be God's congregation or assembly.

And it's not difficult for them, when they hear Jesus speaking to the church or about the church, that they understand something of what he has to say about it.

[13 : 07] Let me quote the words of Bishop Ryle to you. And he's describing here what the church is. When we talk about church, we usually talk about the physical building where you're met this evening, as an example of it.

Or we talk about the experience of church as doing church, doing what you're doing tonight, meeting together. Central to that meeting is the word of God, the reading of the scripture, and prayer and praise and so on.

There we do, church. That's just shorthand for what the church is all about. But this is what Bishop Ryle says. It is a blessed company of all faithful people.

It is the whole body of believers of every age and tongues and people. It is a church composed of all who are washed in the blood of Christ, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, renewed by the Spirit of Christ.

It is one body. All who belong to it are of one heart, and all hold the same truths and believe the same doctrines as necessary to salvation.

[14 : 31] Now, you can see from what Bishop Ryle is saying about the church there, that he is quite narrowly focused on not just the original meaning of it, but describing to us the experience of

being part of that church, what it means to be part of the church of Christ, that this is what marks out those who belong to that church, that they have been redeemed, that they have experienced salvation at the hand of Christ.

They are righteous because they have, by faith, put their trust in Christ. They are clothed in his impeccable righteousness, and so on.

Now, there are many who would want to make the church wider than that limited picture that Bishop Ryle has given to it.

They would lessen the strictures that are descriptive of membership of the church and make it as broad as possible.

So, you know, very often you hear politicians, for example, describing themselves as belonging to a broad church of beliefs.

[16:13] And by beliefs there, they mean political beliefs. So that whether they're members of a Labour Party who would have socialism at the heart of what they believe, or conservatives who would be more leanings towards the right wing or whatever, the argument that some would make is we belong to a broad church.

We're not as far right and we're not as far left as some would want us to be. It allows us to incorporate all kinds, all colours and hues of political belief.

Within the sphere of Christianity, there are some who believe that simply attendance on God's, this building, which is God's house, is sufficient to make the members of the church.

If they indicate an interest, however loose that interest is, however fleeting it is, however tenuous it is, however irregular it is, their membership of the church should not be questioned.

But it is clear from the scripture that the image that Christ portrays of a church of believing people must at least have within it an understanding of who he is and the necessity of being in a relationship with him.

[17:59] Paul the Apostle writes the following, We are God's fellow workers. You are God's field. You are God's building.

According to the grace of God which was given to me as a wise master builder, I have laid the foundation and other builds upon it, but let each one take heed how he builds on it, for no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Now, that may say many things, but one thing that Paul is stating there is the essential relationship, the foundational relationship, that the church has with Jesus Christ, who is the Lord.

Writing to the Ephesians, in chapter 2, Paul says, Jesus Christ himself, being the chief cornerstone in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

So the church is an entity that exists because of Christ. All who are part of it are part of it by reason of what Christ has done in them and for them.

[19:41] And that is a necessity, that is a requirement. Jesus goes on to insist on that, even in these words.

read again the text that we're looking at. I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, he says.

The church belongs to him. I will build. He is responsible for the church's existence.

He is responsible for its maintenance. He is responsible for ensuring that those who form part of it have actually come to be one with him and as such part of the church.

Now, much of the controversy surrounding this verse, which we'll touch on, has to do with the sight being lost of who the subject of this verse is.

[20:55] the focus of many falls upon upon the passion of Peter and the fact that Peter is the one who has responded in the way that he did.

And because it was Peter who was responding, it seems that the attention of those who are looking at the words of the verse are taken up with what he has said and what he means by it.

But in reality, what Jesus is teaching us here is not about Peter, but about himself. The Lord is the focus of the words.

Paul teaches that the Lord Jesus Christ is head of his church, that he is the head of the body that is the church.

We find reference made by Paul to other passages of the scripture that insist that there is one chief cornerstone to this edifice, to this building, to this church, and that headstone is Christ.

[22 : 21] But what is important about that is that every member of the church is linked into that headstone. If you don't belong to Christ, then you don't belong to the church.

If you're not related to Christ, by faith, then you don't belong to the church. Every member is related to him by faith.

And Jesus says just two simple things here. It is my church in the sense that it belongs to him. It doesn't belong to anybody else. It's not the free church with the church belonging to this group of people that have a particular distinction.

That marks them out from other churches or the Church of Scotland or the Church of England or any church for that matter. This church is my church.

And my church there means Christ's church. It belongs to me. I have brought them into a relationship with myself.

[23 : 35] I have bought them with the cost of ransom blood. In the book of Acts, Peter, even there, preaching the gospel, he says, therefore take heed to yourself and to all the flock among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to shepherd the church of God which he has purchased with his own blood.

the church of God. The church of God which he has purchased with his own blood. Your role in that church, Peter says, Paul says, all the ambassadors which bear the name of apostles and preachers that follow on from them, they have a role to play but the church that they have a role to play in is the church of Christ which he has bought with his own blood.

The second thing that Jesus says here about this church, it is my church but it is him that builds this church.

I will build, he says. I will build. No other individual has the authority to build the church of Christ. It's not the role of a minister or a church session or a presbytery or a general assembly to build the church.

There are roles that are played by individuals, by corporate bodies within the church that they are required to fill. There are duties that are required to be performed.

[25 : 22] There are activities that are meant to be carried out but not one member of that church, not one elder of that church, not one minister or moderator or any other individual who has a title within the church can build the church.

This Christ does for himself. Paul writing, again, we've referred to it before, writing to the Ephesian church, God, who is rich in mercy because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.

By grace, you have been saved. No Christian here made themselves alive. no Christian here came to faith by dint of their own insistence.

By grace, you have been saved. This is God's doing. We respond, the faith with which we respond is a grace that is given to us by Jesus Christ.

no other. And the passion that is at the heart of all this, the passion that we overlook because we're so taken up with the fact that the outspoken Peter is referred to by Christ, he doesn't elect, he doesn't call, he doesn't sanctify, he doesn't glorify.

[27 : 08] all these things are the work of God's Spirit who is Christ's and who is doing Christ's bidding for the glory of his name.

The third thing we have, this church has secured foundations. And this is possibly where the most contentious issue comes because, as I said, there's a focus of some on these words as if Jesus is saying to Peter, you, Peter, are the rock and upon you, Peter, I am going to build the church. Read it again. You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

There are experts, I suppose, in language, in the literature of the Old and New Testament who make arguments that would suggest that this is Jesus giving a particular place to Peter, the apostle, that will have him elevated to headship over the church and that headship over the church is to be a headship over all others who are apostles like him.

But you must go back to what Jesus was saying earlier. He asks the question, who do you say that I am? Peter replies, you are the Christ, the son of the living God.

[29 : 07] And Jesus answered, blessed are you, Simon, bar Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed to you this, but my father in heaven. And you are Peter, he says, just as you have said about me that I am the Christ, the son of the living God.

That's what you've said, Peter, about me. You are the Christ, the son of the living God. Now I'm saying to you, Peter, you are Peter, and as your name suggests, Petra, the rock, this is what is true about you, this is who you are.

But then he says, distinct from that, that Christ is going to build his church on this rock.

Now the implication is reading that simply that the rock that he means there is Peter. And the church of Rome has used that as a primary text to substantiate their own papacy and the descendants of Peter occupying that role.

But what we need to understand is that church is what Jesus is referring to, his assembly, the assembly that bears his name, the church that bears his name, the church that owes his existence to him, not to Peter, not to any other disciple, but to him.

[30 : 56] And this church, not Peter's church, but this church that is mine, this church that has my name, is the church upon which the foundation is going to be built.

this is the foundational truth, if you like, of what the church is. You are Peter on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of heaven will not prevail against me.

The Reformed teaching is contrary to what a Roman Catholic teaching is, but let me quote to you John Calvin. Peter had confessed in his own name and that of his brethren that Christ was the Son of God.

On this rock, Christ builds his church, because it is the only foundation, as Paul says, other foundations than this can no man lay.

We make it sound more difficult than it actually is. we could not imagine that an individual, such as the Apostle Peter, would be elevated to this role of church headship based on his own previous experience or subsequent experience.

[32 : 26] It would be a very, very shaky foundation for any building bearing Christ's name to be built on a foundation where the person named is somebody who vacillates, who backslides, who denies the Lord, who submits to temptation, and it would be inconsistent with the nature of the church of Christ.

We already referred to the words of the apostle in 1 Corinthians 3. church. They were all building on another's work as part of that church.

And the role that Peter has is to be a worker in the church for the glory of the Christ, who is the head of the church, who is the foundation of the church.

What they are building, they are building it because Christ has given them that role. The reason the foundation becomes unshakable, or is unshakable, is because of who the foundation is, and who the head is, and that is Christ Jesus.

Why do we need, finally, briefly, secure foundations? Well, if you're part of the church, you won't be puzzled.

[34 : 18] If you're part of the church, you won't find it difficult to understand that the moment you enter into a living relationship with Christ, you encounter the same enmity and the same challenges of a degree that the Lord Jesus Christ himself encountered in this world.

when we think of Christ as the rock who is higher than ourselves, we can easily understand that this is why he points to himself as the one to whom we can go when there is opposition.

The gates of hell will not prevail against you is a difficult one to explain, in the sense that we're not immediately aware of in what sense that can be actually fulfilled.

Some of the commentators have said that what it means is that when opposition comes that the citadel, the church, the building, no enemy is able to overcome it by dint of power.

but then others look at it and they say that rather what we have here is a picture of the militant church where the power of Christ is elevated and exalted and nothing and no one can resist the power of Christ.

[36 : 06] What we understand by this is that Christ is saying to the apostle Peter, reminding him of who he is, teaching him who he is, teaching him of the nature of the relationship that he has with him as the head of this church and that no matter what and no matter who will encounter him and challenge his life and faith that the Christ who is his head, who has the authority and power over all the affairs of the church that nothing can overcome.

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

And then he speaks to the disciples. He's not saying to Peter, you have this authority, you have this power, you have this role as an individual, but he is saying such is the nature of the church of Christ and those who are part of it and by dint of reason that the relationship that they have with him, they are assured of a success if you like, a victory over all comers.

It's not an easy passage to read, it's not an easy passage to explain, but please do remember that the one who is highlighted here is the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He is the one responsible for the creation of this body of believers that have the name of the church, and he is the one who sustains the life of the church, and to ensure that it is supplied with new blood, new membership, and to ensure that its ongoing vitality is something that nothing, bar nothing, would be able to quench or to spoil.

[38 : 25] Well, may God bless to us these few thoughts. Let us pray. Lord, help us to remind ourselves of the nature of the church of Christ, that it is your church, and that you have created it for your glory, and that your glory is revealed in it and through it.

We ask that you would ensure to bring that truth before us in order that we believe it for ourselves and that we may play whatever role that you have committed to us.

Forgive our sins, in Jesus' name. Amen. Our closing psalm is Psalm 126 from the Metrical Psalms, Scottish Psalter, rather.

Psalm 126 from the Scottish Psalter, and we're singing the whole psalm. When Zion's bondage, God turned back as men that dreamed were we and filled with laughter was our mouth, our tongue with melody.

They among the heathens said, The Lord great things for them hath wrought, the Lord hath done great things for us whence joy to us is brought. We'll sing the whole psalm to God's praise when Zion's bondage God turned back.

[39 : 46] When Zion's bondage God turned back, as men that dreamed were we, as men that dreamed were we, then filled with laughter was our mouth, our tongue with melody, our tongue with melody, our tongue with melody, our tongue with melody.

They among the heathens said the Lord, great things for them hath wrought, great things for them hath wrought.

hath done great things for us whence joy to us is brought, whence joy to us is brought, whence joy to us is brought, whence joy to us is brought.

God as streams of water in the south are upon these Lord recall, are upon these Lord recall, who so in tears are reaping time, of joy and joy they shall, of joy and joy they shall, of joy and joy they shall, of joy and joy they shall.

Last man to very precious sea, and going forth thoth more, and going forth thoth more, he doubtless bringing back his shees, rejoicing shall return, rejoicing shall return, rejoice he shall return, rejoice he shall return.

[42 : 49] Now may grace, mercy and peace from God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit rest and abide with you all now and always. Amen. Amen.