

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Matthew 16:13-20

Year A - Proper 16, Text: Matthew 16:13-20
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Verses 16:13–16: After carrying out a ministry in Galilee (plus the Decapolis and Syrophenicia), Jesus leads the disciples to the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi — situated about 20 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. It was ruled by Philip, a son of Herod the Great (4 BC–AD 34). Philip rebuilt the town of Paneas and renamed it Caesarea Philippi to honor the Roman Emperor and to distinguish the location from Caesarea Maritima on the coast of Samaria.

After arriving in the region, Jesus asks the disciples who the people think He, the Son of Man, is. They answer: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. Jesus then asks them who they think He is. Peter answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Verses 16:17–20: Matthew is the only Gospel that contains Jesus’ comments as outlined in verses 17–20. Jesus’ responds by declaring Peter “blessed,” and states that what he confessed was revealed to him — not by “flesh and blood” (a Semitic expression for “human beings”), but by Jesus’ Father in heaven. Faith is God’s gift.

Jesus continues that He will build His church on this “rock” (Peter’s confession). Peter would become the leader of Jesus’ new community in those early days. But as Acts 2 shows, Peter’s authority rested in the *message* of gospel that he proclaimed.

Jesus says he will entrust the “keys of the kingdom” to Peter. The terms used in v. 19, “bind” and “loose” are rabbinic terms that denote “forbid” and “permit,” respectively. This too, is directly connected to the message of the gospel, by which the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed.

Note that the term “church” is used in the Gospels only here and twice in 18:17. The Church of Jesus will not be overcome by the power of death (“the gates of Hades”). Jesus then orders the disciples not to tell anyone that He is the Messiah (16:20).

At this point, the Lectionary somewhat arbitrarily divides off the first Passion Prediction that follows. The “confusion element” in the episode is assigned a place in the gospel pericope for Proper 17.

However, it is important that people see the “prediction–confusion–clarification” segments as a unity. To focus on 16:13–16 by itself can result in people thinking that the disciples “got it” — that they understood Jesus’ ministry and message. No! In all four gospels, the disciples “get it” only after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. This can be seen in the repetition found in all the Gospels:

- **Matthew** contains three “Passion Prediction” narratives: 16:13–16, 21–23; 17:22–23 (see also 18:1–5); and 20:17–23.
- **Mark’s** three passion predictions are found in 8:27–38; 9:30–37; and 10:32–45.
- **Luke’s** three passion predictions are found in 9:18–27; 9:43–48; and 18:31–34.
- In **John**, Jesus refers to Himself being “lifted up” as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness; see 3:14–15; 8:28; and 12:31–33.

The point is that in all four Gospels, the disciples just do not understand the nature of the Kingdom that Jesus has come to establish, and Jesus has to clarify things for them.

A poem by George McDonald (once President of Harvard University), which we have quoted numerous times in these studies, throws light on the false hopes that the disciples embraced:

*They were all waiting for a king
To slay their foes and raise them high;
Thou cam’st a little baby thing
That made a woman cry.*

To which we might add two more lines:

*Thou cam’st to do Thy servant thing,
On cruel cross to die!*

Jesus came not only to do His “servant thing,” but also to call His followers to do the same — full time! Sad to say, many believe that the Christian faith is all and only about believing in Jesus — that He died for our sins, that He has forgiven us, that He conquered the power of death when He rose from the dead, and that He ascended to a far off place from which He will return to take us to His Eternal Home so that we might live in His presence forever.

All this is true enough — but His message and ministry had to do above all else with the breaking in of the Kingdom of God, of the Messianic Age. He, the Messiah, had come to walk the way of a Servant-without-limit and to call His disciples and humanity at large into membership in His Eternal Kingdom. He calls His forgiven brothers and sisters to let Him teach them how to live now as they will then. The implications of His message for humanity at large are mind-boggling!