

**We find a focus and meaning for our lives when we respond with the creedal statement: “You are the Christ.”**  
**Matthew 16:13-20**

*Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”*

A few years ago I remember reading an edited speech by Fr Greg O’Kelly then headmaster of the elite Catholic secondary college in Sydney, St Ignatius Riverview. In it he argues there is a danger for the headmasters of church schools *“to become complacent and forget to constantly seek that the schools do not seduce themselves, concerned only to help those with a religious veneer, providing access to circles of influence and social standing, and not really confronting parents and students with the fundamental question put by the Lord himself: ‘Who do you say that I am?’”*

Just last Wednesday I took part in the fortnightly CSU (university student) Bible study group led by one of the students using a DVD series ‘Living the Questions’. The session theme for the night was ‘Who is Jesus?’

The young woman leading the study asked each of us in turn to answer the question, describing what it was about Jesus that most speaks to us personally. (The Holy Spirit moves in mysterious ways.)

I wonder how we might respond if Jesus asked us today: ‘And you, who do you say I am?’

### **All people are religious**

We are told we live in an increasingly secular age and society;  
that more and more people do not believe in the existence of God or hold any religious beliefs.  
But I question that assumption.

David Tacey, Associate Professor of English at la Trobe University, became intrigued with, and then explored, something he began to discover more and more in his students, a deep longing and “desire for connectedness, which often expresses itself as an emotional relationship with an invisible sacred presence.”

Tacey wrote a book – ‘ReEnchantment’ – where he explores this search for meaning observed in his students, and goes on: *One reason why spirituality is returning today could be that our contemporary experience of alienation is so relentlessly overwhelming that it has activated the desire for ‘belonging’ or ‘interconnectedness’ as an emotional counter-response. The more alienated the self becomes, the more it craves ... being dynamically related to everything around it by virtue of the presence of an indwelling, unifying spirit in all things.*

I tend to agree with Tacey and believe all people are religious to the extent that at some point in their lives they ask of themselves three existential questions:

“Who am I?” “Why am I here?” and “Where is meaning to be found?”

I believe there is a deeply spiritual dimension to our inner self that refuses to accept we are just here for a time – three score years and ten – and dares to believe there is some greater significance to our existence.

To that extent all people are religious/spiritual beings.

### **Exegesis**

In this morning’s Gospel we are at a turning point in Matthew’s recording of the story. Until now Jesus has been teaching his disciples, healing people and challenging others’ perception of truth.

But now he suddenly challenges his disciples as to what this all means.

From this moment on, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem and he marks this turning point with the question: "*But who do you say that I am?*" It is a moment of truth.

But there is a strange twist in the question if we study it closely.

Although Jesus couches it in terms of himself – "Who do you say that I am?" – the surface question contains a much deeper, perhaps even more profound and disturbing question;  
the unspoken question being:

Who are you, Simon? Who are you, James, John, Andrew, Mary?

In asking his disciples to make a decision about who he – Jesus – is,

Jesus is challenging them to ask those crucial religious questions of themselves:

"Who am I?" "Why am I here?" "Where is meaning to be found?"

The way the disciples respond to Jesus' question "*Who do you say I am?*" will also define who **they are**.

Similarly, the way we answer the question as to who Jesus is for us will also define who we are, what our purpose in life is, and where we find ultimate meaning for our lives and relationships and the world in which we live.

### **And Simon responds: "You are the Christ."**

Simon's response is as much a statement about Simon – Peter 'the rock' – as it is about Jesus.

As Jesus turns toward Jerusalem, so too does Simon, now Peter.

Peter may not yet fully understand what that affirmation of faith means (one commentator delightfully describes Peter as "the 'vacillating rock man, the confessor prone to denial, the prop who needs support'"), yet Peter has discovered something about himself, why he is there, and where he may ultimately find meaning.

Peter now has a focus, a direction and purpose.

### **We find answers in commitment**

I began by referring to the universal spiritual longing found in all people – and, I believe, the body politic of our nation – for some meaning to our existence.

And Peter discovers that meaning when he looks beyond himself.

When he responds with commitment to Jesus: "You are the Christ",

he discovers something about himself: "I am Peter."

'Because you are the Christ, I can be Peter.'

When Peter commits himself to the great mystery beyond himself,

he discovers himself and is called forth into life.

Perhaps the issue for our age is not so much that people are no longer 'religious' but that we have lost the ability to commit ourselves to life and others;

that in our society today there is a confusion of opportunities and things to do, so many options open to us that we no longer make a commitment to anything.

And where commitment is lacking chaos is found.

Jesus' question to Simon Peter demands a response and in the act of committing himself Peter discovers his life has focus, a purpose and meaning.

The organizing principle for Peter from that moment on is a gospel of compassion, justice & grace and a deep commitment and belief that the way of Christ – the way of justice and love – will out in the end.

A few minutes ago I referred to the CSU Bible study held last Wednesday evening.

It was a typically chilly Canberra evening but ten of us braved the cold and gathered together for the 'Living the Questions' session.

And as each of the young people responded to the question 'Who is Jesus for you?' I suddenly felt a great wave of hope flow over me, the Spirit of Christ surge through me, for although each of our answers differed from one another it was evident that each possessed an awareness and

commitment to a reality beyond ourselves that was calling us forward into life.

"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Where there is commitment there is life.

### **Creedal affirmation**

Sadly, and I am as much to blame as anyone else, we rarely recite the great creeds of the church in our worship any more (except when there are baptisms).

The Latin word – 'credo' – means 'I believe'.

The power of the creed is not found in its doctrinal statements but the members of Christian community who, as one, stand together and out of their own experience of life utter those first two words 'I believe'.

The words that follow, attempting to set out our system of beliefs are always imperfect, being a human construct,

but the real power of the creed is found as we all stand as a community to confess our relationship with and within the eternal mystery of life – the living God - who surrounds us all.

Jesus asks the question: "But you – members of Canberra City Uniting Church – who do you say that I am?"

And with Peter we respond with the creedal words of faith:

"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Such is the power of the creed and what it means to be religious people;

to make a commitment and there discover our focus, our purpose and meaning;

that we are in relationship with the eternal mystery of God

and that love, compassion, justice and grace will out in the end. Amen.

*(Please stand, if able, and join in affirming our creedal focus for living)*

***I believe in the living God  
who creates and sustains the world out of love.***

***I believe in Jesus Christ the Lord  
who demonstrated by his words and work  
and by his sacrificial life  
how God's rule of peace and goodwill  
can be exercised on earth.***

***I believe that the spirit of God  
is present with us and can be experienced  
through faith, prayer and forgiveness,  
and in the good we do. Amen.***

**TiS 477:** "Jesus calls us here to meet him"