

“What Have You Heard?”

“But who do you say that I am?”

The New York Post is one of the oldest newspapers in the United States. Founded by Alexander Hamilton, the Post for years was one of the most prominent newspapers in New York City at a time when dozens of newspapers were published. While it survived many of those once-great publications, today the Post is known as one of the primary examples of “tabloid journalism,” specializing in the sensational and scandalous stories announced with provocative headlines. One of the most famous features of the Post is Page Six, the newspaper’s daily gossip column that features the latest salacious news about celebrities, politicians, sports personalities, and other public figures whose “dirty laundry” is fodder for public consumption. Many people buy the Post strictly to learn the latest gossip about their favourite stars and how their lives may not be as glamorous as they appear to be on TV or in the movies.

You do not have to be a reader of the New York Post to know that gossip has been a part of human interactions since the dawn of time. When people had to draw water from community wells, those common areas became the site of daily sharing of local gossip and the spreading of rumours. As soon as fences were built, neighbours were meeting across those barriers to share the latest “scuttlebutt” about what was happening next door or across town. No sooner had Gutenberg invented the printing press than “scandal sheets” began to be published, including publications such as those found at supermarket check out lines. The dawn of the internet only increased the means through which gossip and rumours can be spread, often with very damaging consequences. No matter how it is spread, one of the sad realities of gossip and rumourmongering is that *“people love it when you lose, they love dirty laundry.”* (Don Henley).

As he travelled throughout the Holy Land preaching, teaching, and healing, Jesus is aware that people are beginning to talk about him, speculating on who this man from Nazareth might be. His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount resulted in the crowds being *“astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”* (Matthew 7:28-29). When Jesus calms the storm on the Sea of Galilee, *“they were amazed, saying, ‘What sort of man is this, that even the winds*

and the sea obey him?'" (8:27). When our Lord feeds the multitudes on five loaves of bread and two fish, the crowds were amazed and began to say, *"this is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."* (John 6:14). Knowing that his disciples have also been hearing the rumours and speculation that is circulating about him, Jesus decides to ask them directly what they have been hearing. So, after yet another contentious encounter with the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus leads his followers *"into the district of Caesarea Philippi"* (16:13), which was about twenty miles north of the Sea of Galilee. This had once been the site of a worship center dedicated to the Canaanite god Baal, then in Hellenistic times became known as Paneas because the god Pan had been worshiped in a famous grotto and spring. It was renamed by Herod the Great after he built a temple to Caesar Augustus, who the Romans worshiped as a god. After Herod's death, it was made a part of the territory of his son Philip, who enlarged the town and renamed it after Tiberius Caesar and himself. In leading his disciples to this place in the shadow of a temple to Caesar, Jesus is safely removed from the Jewish crowds and the surveillance of his opponents; it is here that Jesus can safely ask his disciples, *"who do people say that the Son of Man is?"* Their response shows that the populace has high opinions about Jesus' identity; there is no indication that there are any scandalous rumours being spread. Instead, the disciples respond that *"some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."* (16:14). The common thread that unites these opinions is the perception that Jesus stands in the line of the prophets, a perception that is publicly shared when the crowds greet Jesus on his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday with the proclamation that *"this is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee"* (21:11). Like many of God's prophets, Jesus preaches repentance, performs mighty works, and boldly proclaims the will of God for Israel. To identify Jesus as a prophet whom God had raised from the dead is a high Christology, revealing the high regard the crowds have for Jesus.

But Jesus' intention in asking his disciples *"what have you heard?"* involves more than getting a report on the local scuttlebutt about Jesus' identity. His next question is a challenge that is directed at his disciples, one in which they must consider who they understand Jesus to be: *"But who do you say that I am?"* Earlier the disciples, having witnessed Jesus' authority over nature, had raised the question of his identity (*"What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"* – 8:27). On one occasion, they even experienced a flash of heavenly insight and revered him as the Son of God (*"And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'"* – 14:33). But this is the first time Jesus puts them on the spot and calls for a direct answer to his question: *"But who do **you** say that I am?"* "You" here is plural; Jesus wants to know what this group of followers thinks about the one who called them to be his disciples.

The disciple who first responds is Simon Peter, speaking both for himself and on behalf of the group: “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*” (16:15). Peter’s confession “*stands out amid the cacophony of conflicting opinions heard throughout Galilee*” (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). The title “messiah” (“anointed one”) was applied to priests and kings in the Old Testament, as well as occasionally to prophets:

- “[Moses] poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron’s head and anointed him, to consecrate him.” – Leviticus 8:12.
- “There the priest Zadok took the horn of oil from the tent and anointed Solomon. Then they blew the trumpet, and all the people said, ‘Long live King Solomon!’” – 1 Kings 1:39.
- “Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place.” – 1 Kings 19:16.

The hope for the coming messiah was primarily anchored in the covenant God made with David, when the God of Israel promises that “*the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house ... He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever*” (2 Samuel 7:11-13). Hope for the fulfillment of the Davidic dynasty was kept alive by the prophets, who envisioned the coming of a new David, a royal messiah from David’s descendants:

- “For a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onwards and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.” – Isaiah 9:6-7.
- “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.” – Ezekiel 34:23-24.

Peter also identifies Jesus as the “*son of the living God,*” which both contrasts Jesus with the idolatrous associations of this locale and identifies him with the one of whom Moses speaks in Deuteronomy: “*For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the fire, as we have, and lived?*” (Deuteronomy 5:26). In his confession, “*Peter recognizes Jesus as someone who*

melds the past and the future into the present time: the long-awaited Messiah who was and is to come has indeed arrived. One who, Peter clarifies, is also 'the Son of the living God.'" (Jost Zetsche).

While Jesus' question had been addressed to the entire gathering of disciples, he now responds directly to Peter, accepting the confession that he is Messiah and God's Son without hesitation or qualification: "*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.*" (16:17). Addressing his disciple by his given name, Jesus indicates that his disciple is not blessed because of a personal attainment or insight he has achieved. Knowledge of Jesus' saving role comes from divine revelation – as a gift, not an attainment. The fact that it has been "revealed" (*apokalypto*) connotes not some personal, individual spiritual exercise, but the divine disclosure of an eschatological secret. "*Peter is blessed because he has received this insight into the mystery of Jesus as a revelation from the Father.*" (Mitch and Sri).

Jesus continues his response to his disciple's confession by proclaiming that "*you are Peter; and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it*" (16:18). The name "Peter" means "stone" or "rock" (Greek *petros*, Aramaic *cephas*). There is no documented evidence of anyone ever being named "Rock" in either Aramaic or Greek prior to Simon. In bestowing upon his disciple this new and unique name, Peter is here pictured as the foundation of the church that Jesus is building. While Peter is the foundation, Jesus clearly identifies himself as the builder of the "church" (*ekklesia*), the renewed people of God, constituted by the disciples of Jesus. Built upon the "rock" of the confession of Jesus as Messiah and Son of the living God, the Church of Jesus Christ is assured that even "*the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.*" Originally found in Isaiah 38:10, the "gates of Hades" can mean the same as the "gates of death":

- "Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?" – Job 38:17.
- "Be gracious to me, O LORD. See what I suffer from those who hate me; you are the one who lifts me up from the gates of death." – Psalm 9:13.

The realm of the dead, which no human being can conquer, is nevertheless not stronger than the church founded on the Rock, and the church will always endure to the end of history, accompanied by its Lord who promises that "*I am with you always, to the end of the age*" (28:20). "Gates of Hades" may also refer to portals of the underworld from which the powers of Satan emerge to attack the church, the "time of trial" of which Jesus speaks in the Garden of Gethsemane: "*Stay awake and*

pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (26:41).

- “The church does not escape from the power of Hades, but participates in the struggle between the two kingdoms with the sure promise that the opposing kingdom, symbolized by the powers of death, will never prevail.” – M. Eugene Boring.

Jesus goes on to promise his newly named disciple Peter that *“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”* (16:19). Peter’s role as holder of the keys is fulfilled now on earth as chief teacher of the church; the keeper of the keys has authority within the house as administrator and teacher (*“I shall place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open.”* – Isaiah 22:22). The language of binding and loosing is rabbinic terminology for authoritative teaching, for having the authority to interpret the Torah and apply it to particular cases, declaring what is permitted and what is not permitted. Jesus, as one who taught with authority and has given his authority to his disciples, here gives the primary disciple the authority to teach in his name. Jesus will later give similar authority to the church as a whole, with Peter having a special responsibility as chief teacher as well as representative and model: *“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”* (18:18).

Knowing that news of a messiah could have been easily misunderstood among his people, Jesus *“sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.”* (16:20). Jesus has first to clarify for his followers what kind of Messiah he is, that he is not *“a political Messiah, one who will put an end to the Roman occupation and fully establish the glory of God’s people”* (Zetzsche). The real enemy is not a pagan empire; it is the sin and guilt that separates the human family from the Father in heaven; *“victory over this enemy must be the focus of the Messiah’s mission, and it will come at the cost of his life.”* (Mitch and Sri).
“But who do you say that I am?”

Jesus’ challenge to his disciple remains a question that challenges every generation of those who are called through baptism into the Church which is the Body of Christ. Many people in our world continue to hold Jesus in high regard; other religions consider him a wise teacher or a noble prophet. But while Jesus is one who proclaims God’s Word to us, we know him as the one who is truly *“the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”* The Church of Jesus Christ in every age is built on the solid

rock of our confession that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Saviour, that he is the one who is *“true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, [he] is my Lord.”* (*Small Catechism*). Because *“the church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ its Lord,”* we have confidence that the Church and its mission will endure even through the most trying and difficult of circumstances. In the *Augsburg Confession*, our primary Lutheran confession of faith, we declare that *“at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.”* (Article VII). Jesus Christ is not for us a historical figure or wise teacher from the past; he is our crucified and risen Lord who continues to abide with us, assuring us that not even death can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- “Christian faith as a living religious response is simply not directed at those historical facts about Jesus, or at the historical reconstruction of Jesus. Christian faith is directed to a living person. The ‘real Jesus’ for Christian faith is the resurrected Jesus; the real Jesus for Christian faith is not simply a figure from the past but very much and above all a figure of the present, a figure, indeed, that defines believers’ present by his presence.” – Luke Timothy Johnson.

Publications like Page Six of The New York Post will continue to exist as long as people have that human inclination for sharing gossip, for hearing the latest rumours, for sharing whatever scuttlebutt is being spread. But for those whose faith is built upon the solid rock of the confession first shared by Peter, we know that the heart of our faith is not a matter of rumour or conjecture; the Church into which we have been joined is *“God’s house of living stones, built for his own habitation.”* We are God’s people, God’s Church that is built on the sure and solid foundation that the one who calls and gathers us is indeed our Lord, our Saviour, our Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Amen.