

Albany Presbyterian Church

August 23rd 2026, Matthew 16:13-20 Romans 12:1-8 *Who do you say that I am*

Have you seen a movie called Conclave?

It is a political thriller film based on the 2016 novel by Robert Harris. It is a story about choosing a Pope in the Roman Catholic Church and the politics surrounding that process. The process is what we call the apostolic succession, which begins with the story we read in Matthew 16: 13-20, where Jesus said he would build his church on Peter, the rock.

This passage is also where the word “church” first appears in the gospel, and perhaps the only place where it does: in Greek, “church” is *ecclesia*, meaning the called-upon people or the assembly. This tells us that in essence, the church is the people.

In this story, Jesus asks his disciples how people see him and who they think he is. Not only was he once again hassled by the Pharisees and Sadducees earlier in the chapter, who constantly questioned who he was, but Matthew also tells us that they were in a city called Caesarea Philippi. A Roman city full of worship of the Greek idols, a city named after Caesar and built by the king Herod Philip.

I thought of our own city, our context here in Auckland, a city of diverse cultures, faiths, and beliefs.

At Massey University, we meet students from many different countries with diverse faiths and traditions; some are from India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. Some are Buddhist, Muslim, or Hindu, while others call themselves spiritual rather than religious. Some students think we are doing community work. Just the other day, one of the chaplains came to compliment us, saying that one of the students had shared with her her experience of meeting us on Friday, describing it as wonderful and uplifting, and calling us "nice old people."

Now in our third semester, I wonder about how the students think of us, who we are and why we are doing what we are doing. Why we offer hospitality, a place to come, rest, be encouraged, and be supported. I wonder if that is similar to why Jesus asks, “Who do the people say I am?”

The disciples said, “Some said John the Baptist, others say Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

Why would they say this? Maybe because they believed the prophets of old would return before the Messiah comes. Or is it because they got to see Jesus when he taught, fed, restored, and redeemed and healed those who were sick, blind, possessed, and marginalised? But they had not spent night and day, for as long as the disciples; they did not see Jesus rebuke the storm, claim the sea, raise the dead, heal the broken as much as the disciples.

And so what does this mean to us? I wonder if we could ask ourselves this question: Who is Jesus to me?

“You are the messiah,” Peter declared. But wasn’t he the one who often gets caught up in his doubt, whose feet stumble, who always runs ahead of Jesus, missing the mark, failing to understand, and failing to keep his eyes on Jesus? He who will betray Jesus, who will deny him three times, who runs away from threats of death, who abandons his friends, the Lord and the Messiah, he declared.

What came over him when no one dared to say or answer Jesus with certainty and faith?

Jesus explains, “It is not flesh and blood, in verse 17, that revealed to you, but the God above, my Father in heaven,” who taught you to say, “You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

And “To you, (Jesus said) Peter, the rock, the one who professed your faith, upon this faith in the Messiah and the Son of the living God, I will build my church.”

And as far as the gospel of Matthew is concerned, this conversation Jesus had with his disciples marks a turning point in the gospel, for from here on, Jesus begins to talk about his mission, his death and resurrection, the purpose of God upon his life and the life of those who follow Jesus.

In one of the questions we were asked during the review of our parish a few weeks ago, one that asks, "Do you know what your mission statement is, what your goal is, and so on? I would say many of us were confused by that question. I wonder what the question meant and how I would phrase it if I were to write this review. In light of the Word of God, as we read from Matthew 16 and Romans 12, I wonder whether it would be better to ask ourselves instead: Who do we say we are? As the church and as APC. How would you describe APC?

Earlier last year, when we started our ministry at Massey, we had Helen make a beautiful bookmark about who we are, which we gave to students there. This year, Peter made one of these, a little card about who we are. (Children's talk -bookmark)

We wanted to say who we are and explain why we are doing what we are doing on Friday 10-12 at Massey.

We want to say, with a cup of tea, a smile, and a "how are you?" that God loves you, saying that we are there where they are to share the love of God as we know in Jesus and to let you know that God loves you too, whoever you are, wherever you came from.

Over the years, it was explained to me that APC is heaven for those who seek refuge spiritually, where people come as they are and rest in the presence of God and those who love the Lord. We are a family of God to which we all belong.

As Paul says in Romans 12, in the light of God's mercy, our gathering, the church, coming together was and is the spiritual act of worship, in which many offered their lives as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

And so, to me the AGM is not just a business meeting, though the name suggests otherwise; it is a time when we celebrate and give thanks for our lives as a congregation. We celebrate that we are differently abled, gifted from God to build up the body of Christ. We are the rock, the Peter, on which Jesus built his church. As Paul says in Romans 12:5, "in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to that body." We are all connected, and we belong. Here in the people of God, all are welcome, and all are loved. It also says, that we are not alone; even in our darkest hours, one affects all, and so as the song goes, "We bear each other's pain and sorrow, as well as laughter and joy." And there is no room for ambition, greed, or hatred; putting our needs before others- only through faith and humility can we be the true and faithful church of the living God.

Therefore, the Church is not a random gathering of like-minded people; it is what Christ built upon the faith that Peter confessed in the Messiah. We are the church of the living God. Therefore, we are the living, moving, growing, '*Reformanda*' reforming, ever reforming, and active body of Christ in the world.

It is so tempting to be conformed to the patterns of the world, where politics, competition, division, faction, cost-benefit, productivity, favouritism, or discrimination are at play; rather, as Paul says, we must give ourselves to God, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, to test, approve and fulfil the will of God. And that is our mission statement, and it is hung over here. APC is the living and breathing gathered and called-up people, '*Ekklesia*', that we are to live to do the will of God, good, pleasing and perfect will, that is, as the prophet Micah said in Micah 6:8, to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our living God. And as we do this, there is no other praise, worship, or living in faith greater than these: to please, to Honour, and to praise God, almighty and everlasting, and ever-loving. Amen.