

We are so used to seeing this passage as the hinge or turning point of the narrative in Mark's Gospel that it is worth noting that it functions slightly differently in Matthew. The disciples together have already declared Jesus to be 'truly the Son of God' when they are overwhelmed by the experience of seeing him walk on the water (Matthew 14.22-33). Now we have the outworking of this insight in gritty conversation. How does a sense of Jesus' mysterious divinity actually link with the flow of the story of the whole people of God? How does Jesus fit in with earlier tradition? According to the disciples, some say that he is 'Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the prophets' – in other words, that he completely fits this earlier pattern of prophetic ministry by reliving it in the present. Matthew is the only Gospel writer to specifically name Jeremiah here. Elijah was widely expected to return as a forerunner of the Messiah, but Jeremiah seems to be a different case. Why might he be mentioned here by name? Perhaps because the whole story of Jeremiah follows a pattern of sadness and loss, followed by restoration and new life. Perhaps Jeremiah, of all the Old Testament prophets, has a biography that corresponds to Jesus' own pattern of crucifixion and then resurrection.

Now Peter speaks up and offers a costly and risky answer to Jesus' question, 'Who do you say that I am?' He uses the title 'Messiah' (literally 'anointed one', but the clear meaning is 'King'). This links into all the religious hopes and predictions of a great leader sent by God, and also into the political expectation that this leader will be of the house and line of King David – the one who will set his people free. The moment when Peter is willing to take the risk of saying this, of expressing his relationship with Jesus in these controversial terms, is the moment when he flags up both his faith in the mission of Jesus and his willingness to be involved in it. This is the moment that Jesus declares to be a moment of divine revelation. This risk-taking qualifies this disciple to be the rock, the foundation. It also signals the start of the Church, the beginning of a community enacting the purposes of heaven as heaven's agents on earth.