



**A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 23 August by the Very Reverend Toby Wright, Dean of Wells.**

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## **Who is Jesus to you?**

In the four lectures that led to his book, *Mere Christianity*, CS Lewis offers an extended reflection on today's gospel.<sup>1</sup> In answer to who is Jesus, Lewis argues that Jesus cannot be simply regarded as a good moral teacher. Instead, Lewis argues that for someone to claim what Jesus does, he must either be a Liar, knowingly deceiving people; or a Lunatic who is sincerely mistaken and deluded; or Lord – truly the Son of God. This is known as the Liar, Lunatic or Lord Trilemma.<sup>2</sup>

At Caesarea Philippi, Peter, when asked who Jesus is, declares him as '*the Christ the Son of the living God*'. And it is here that Christ launches the Church into the world. Only the Son of God could do this. CS Lewis argues that a Liar would never board the ship of the Church. A Lunatic could not guide the voyage. Only the Lord can lead the Church on the pilgrim way.

On Thursday of this week, I will lead a pilgrimage to Watchet to the shrine of S Decuman, the sixth/seventh century Welsh holy man and hermit on his feast day. Hagiography has it that he floated, with a cow, on a coat over from Wales(!), only to be beheaded whilst at prayer and then he carried his own head to the place of the Well we shall go to and pray. And yet this extraordinary story reminds us of the compelling stories of the 10 to 15 billion people who through the years have confessed Jesus as the Christ the Son of the Living God. For the confession of faith in the person of Christ changes lives.

Such a confession is a sensible response to the world we know. Modern science is a legacy of the biblical world view.<sup>3</sup> Far from being opposed to one another, science and religion sit comfortably together, as increasing numbers of scientists

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<sup>1</sup> The three original lectures were *Right or Wrong: A clue to the meaning of the universe* (1941), *What Christians Believe* (1942) and *Christian Behaviour* (1943), Lewis then added *Beyond Personality* (1944).

<sup>2</sup> This came up in Lewis' third lecture '*The Shocking Alternative*', the third talk in the series *What Christians Believe* (1 Feb 1942), and then became Ch3 of *Mere Christianity*.

<sup>3</sup> As CS Lewis asserts in *Mere Christianity*.

in the developing cultures of our world are recognising. It was belief in God that motivated the scientific advances of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the fact that we are made in the image of God is a cornerstone of our civilisation. And indeed, scientists are themselves all people of faith – you can't do physics, unless you believe that the universe is intelligible<sup>4</sup>: you can't prove this.

For us who accept the Lordship of Christ, we hold the gospel of the glory of Christ in the earthen vessels of our bodies.<sup>5</sup> To accept the truth of Christianity, means it is not just a collection of wise sayings, but one which gives us a true analysis of the created order around us. And today's Gospel challenges each of us in this place to think about our world view, as Jesus asks the profound question: '*Who do you say that I am?*'

Jesus says this at the worship site of a pagan God, at the foot of Mount Hermon, which is surrounded by carved niches and sanctuaries to the pagan god of nature, Pan. The rock formation was known as the 'gates of hell', seen as the entrance to the underworld, and was a significant tributary of the Jordan river, the most significant water source in the region.

It is here that Peter answers the question with the words, '*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*'.<sup>6</sup> Whereas in Mark's Gospel we just have, '*You are the Christ*', Matthew includes '*the Son of the living God*' – some of you may recall that two weeks ago we heard the disciples in the boat proclaim Jesus as '*Son of the living God*' after Jesus walked on water.<sup>7</sup> Origen in his commentary on the Gospel suggests that Peter must have had a deeper knowledge of Jesus, making the distinction between believing and knowing Christ.<sup>8</sup> For here we have the definite article – *the* Son of God and *the* Christ – so arguing what we have here

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<sup>4</sup> The mathematician and Oxford Professor John Lennox argues this often, such as [here](#) at 10.20.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 4.7.

<sup>6</sup> Origen points to God saying 'They (God's people) have forsaken me the spring of *living* water' (Jer 2.13) and Jesus proclaiming 'I am the way, the truth and the *life*' (John 14.6), to emphasise the divine nature of Jesus. This response needs to be seen in light of the upcoming account of the Transfiguration 17.1-8. Also this is a mid-point account which recapitulates the opening of the Gospel with the birth narrative 1-2 which echoes the divine identity.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 14.33.

<sup>8</sup> Origen *Commentary on Matthew* 12.9. Also see Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, (ed. and trans. John Henry Newman; Southampton: Saint Austin Press, 1997), vol 1. Pp583-84.

is about nature, not resemblance<sup>9</sup>; Jesus is ‘the current in which all rivers and brooks must flow’<sup>10</sup>: the real deal. <sup>11</sup>

So, what of this for you and for me? We are told in I John that ‘Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.’<sup>12</sup> This is not a one off, but a model of a conversion experience<sup>13</sup> which reminds us that true belief will always bring forth a living action of love.<sup>14</sup> Just as Peter had to learn that the carpenter from Nazareth was in fact God's Messiah, anointed one, so Israel could not have guessed that the child hidden among the reeds was God's chosen deliverer. God's salvation often comes in forms the world overlooks. And we see the outworking of this in ordinary lives of people who acclaim Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God.

If you'd like to consider this further, then I warmly encourage you to think about joining the Emmaus group which the Sub-Dean is leading for those who want to take faith further. Today's gospel challenges you to consider whether you, too, confess Jesus as the Christ and the Son of the living God. And if so, then are you bringing forth a living action of love in your life, as you choose to live it?

At Caesarea Philippi Jesus asks the question that stands at the centre of every human life: ‘Who do you say that I am?’ Lewis translated that question into modern language with his challenge: Is Jesus liar, lunatic, or Lord? Peter answers, ‘Lord’.

In the Narnia series, the dragon-prowed Dawn Treader (sometimes seen as the fourth dragon of the book<sup>15</sup>) carries its company toward Aslan's country. The Church as the community who acclaim Christ as the Lord, is like Lewis's redeemed dragon-ship; fashioned in the shape of what once inspired fear, yet now bearing pilgrims safely through darkness. The dragons of sin, death, and unbelief remain, but the greatest dragon has changed sides in CS Lewis's writing. Built by Christ, launched by the waters of Caesarea Philippi, steered by faith, and

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<sup>9</sup> Hilary of Poitiers, On the Trinity 6.36. CS Lewis also picks up on this in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when Mr Beaver says, “*Aslan is a lion, the Lion, the great Lion.*”

<sup>10</sup> Barth emphasises this in an early sermon: ‘You are not only a beam of the Light of God, rather than eternal Light of God itself. That is what the expressions “Christ” i.e. “the King” and “Son of God” mean. Both say the same thing; Peter wanted to say: You are the complete and perfect revelation of God, you are the current in which all rivers and brooks must flow into in order to reach the sea...’ Karl Barth, “Predigt 3: August: Matthäus 16, 13-17” in K. Barth, N. Barth, and G. Sauter, *Predigten 1913* (Zurich, Theologischer Verlag, 1994) pp. 386-87.

<sup>11</sup> Musically, Orlande de Lassus’ 2 part motet *Quem dicunt homines/Tu es Christus* is an excellent exploration of this text.

<sup>12</sup> 1 John 5.1.

<sup>13</sup> For a development of this thought see Augustine, *Tenth homily: I John 5.1-3*.

<sup>14</sup> Catherine of Siena would often say that Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi is only complete when it becomes charity: ‘Love of God that does not become love of neighbour is self-deception.’

<sup>15</sup> The first three being: 1) The dying dragon on Dragon Island; 2) Eustace as a dragon and 3) the concept of dragonishness itself representing greed, selfishness, and spiritual corruption.

sailing toward the rising sun<sup>16</sup>, the Church becomes the vessel against which even the gates of hell cannot prevail.

So, how will you respond to Jesus's question in your life? Who is Jesus to you?

Amen.

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23 August 2026

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<sup>16</sup> Malachi 4.2 "But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings."