

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time 'A' (2014)Introduction to Isaiah 22:19-23

In today's Gospel, Jesus chooses Peter to be the rock on which he will build his church. He gives him the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. The Lectionary chooses a story from the Book of Isaiah to preface Peter's call. Hezekiah, the 13th king of Judah who died in 685 B.C. had chosen a man named Shebna as master of the palace. Shebna failed in his responsibilities so the Lord chooses a replacement named Eliakim who is to become a father to the people of Jerusalem and who will receive the key of the House of David. The keys in Jewish literature means authority in the interpretation of the Law. The ministry of Eliakim illustrates the ministry of Peter. Peter and his successors are to be fathers who serve the people of God. The word "pope" means father.

Homily, 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (2014)

Prior to his death and resurrection, Jesus spoke about his future church for the first time in Matthew 16. He asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus said to him in reply,

Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Mt 16:13-20)

The name "Peter" (Petros in Greek) means "rock." Jesus established his church on the rock that is Peter.¹ This may seem surprising since Peter was not very impressive early on. When Jesus prophesied at the Last Supper that one of the disciples would betray him, Peter swore that he would never do so. In fact, Peter denied three times that he even knew Jesus. Nonetheless, Jesus rehabilitated Peter after rising from the dead by asking him three times, "Simon, Son of John, do you love me?" Three times

¹ "You are *kepha* and upon this *kepha* I will build my Church" (Aramaic).

Peter said, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Three times Jesus told Peter, "Take care of my sheep."

So Jesus chose a weak human being as the chief pastor of his church with the responsibility for caring for the Lord's flock and strengthening the other apostles. According to the text of today's Gospel, Jesus chose Peter as the first head of the church because of his profession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Perhaps another reason Jesus chose Peter, a weak human being, is to show what the power of Christ can do with human weakness. Peter became one of the greatest Christians in history.

Eventually Peter went to Rome and was martyred there under the Emperor Nero around the year 63.² The early Christians knew that the promises Jesus made to Peter could not die with Peter, so they chose someone to take his place as leader of the church in Rome. His name was Linus. This has been the practice for almost 2,000 years. Thus, Catholics consider the Bishop of Rome, whom we call the pope, to be the successor of Peter. In order to be faithful to Christ's plan for his church, Catholics want to be in the church that has as its chief shepherd, the successor of St. Peter. *Servus Servorum Dei*.

² At the end of 1 Peter, the author writes, "The Church here in Babylon . . . sends you her greeting, and so does my son, Mark" (1 Pet 5:13). Babylon is a code word for Rome (c.f. Rev 14:8). Ignatius of Antioch remarked, in his *Letter to the Romans* (110 A.D.) that he could not command the Roman Christians the way Peter and Paul once did (*Essential Catholic Survival Guide*, p. 46).

Many people misunderstand Catholic teaching about the pope’s teaching authority. Catholicism has never taught that we must believe everything the pope says. Popes have made mistakes, and all popes have committed sins like all other human beings. What Jesus did promise Peter is that the Gates of Hell would never prevail against the Church and that whatever Peter bound on earth would be bound in Heaven when he defined a matter of faith or morals.

Catholics describe this power as “infallibility” – a word often misunderstood even by Catholics. Infallibility doesn’t mean that the pope can’t make mistakes. It means that he proclaims Christ’s doctrine infallibly when he formally and solemnly teaches on a matter of faith or morals. In the first millennium this authority was exercised usually in ecumenical councils where all the bishops of the Church gathered as teachers and judges of faith and morals for the universal Church.³

This is one of the important reasons for being a Catholic. Among all the Christian Churches, only the Catholic Church is guided by the successors of St. Peter and the other apostles.

³ Infallibility belongs in a special way to the pope as head of the bishops when he proclaims definitively from the Chair of Peter some doctrine of faith or morals. This has only happened twice when popes declared the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Mary into Heaven. What infallibility does is prevent a pope from solemnly and formally teaching as “truth” something that is, in fact, error.

Infallibility does not mean that leaders of the Church are protected from sin. The pope and other bishops must struggle as all other Christians to live good and virtuous lives. Jesus warned that scandals would arise in the church and that weeds and wheat would grow together in his kingdom until the Final Judgment when the Angels would separate the good from the bad.

Peter's ministry is inseparable from the ministry of his brothers and sisters. In fact, Jesus' statement, "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven" addressed personally to Peter, is entrusted to the whole community of the faithful in Mt 18:18. Peter possesses in a particular way what also belongs to the universal Church. The Church is built on Peter and the promise Jesus makes to Peter is made to all of us: "... upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

I thank God for the guidance and support we receive from the Church. If I had to rely only on myself or on my personal faith in Jesus I could easily be deluded. How do I know that what I feel is really the truth and God's will? Every child learns how to live in the context of a family and a wider community, guided by parents and others who have more experience and wisdom. The same is true for our spiritual journey. We need the wisdom and experience of a faith community that has been guided by Jesus

Christ since its beginning. The Scriptures and the teaching authority of the Church as well as the witness of saints and spiritual masters are all part of the Church's great wisdom tradition.

For several years I was heavily involved in a non-Christian Eastern spiritual movement. There was a lot of value in that movement, but I came to see that it lacked something crucial: the teachings and person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of the world. It also lacked the wisdom and guidance of the Catholic Church – the Church built by Jesus Christ on the rock of Peter; the Church given the promise by Jesus that the gates of hell would never prevail against it. We can bet our lives on that promise.