

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time + 26 August 2023 + Isa 22:19-23 + Mt 16:13-20

Our readings today are critical to understanding the nature of the one, true Church founded by Christ. So to begin, let's examine our 1st reading to understand the background of the Gospel. Shebna was a sinful chief steward in the court of King Hezekiah in Old Testament Judah. In our day, we might call him the "prime minister", as he had authority second only to the King in the Kingdom of Judah, which was King David's dynasty. And so the Lord announces that a man named Eliakim will take the evil Shebna's place as Prime Minister. The "key" that Eliakim receives refers to the authority he will receive to make binding decisions in the name of the King. There was no higher honour, nor more grave responsibility, for a subject of the kingdom.

Against this background, we fast-forward about 700 years to our Gospel today. Jesus has traveled all over Israel proclaiming that the new Kingdom of David--which is the Kingdom of God--is finally at hand. But as we have seen all through our Gospel readings this summer, most of the people Jesus encounters don't understand who He is. But Simon does get it: Jesus is more than a prophet; He is *the Christ, the Son of the living God*. 'Christ' is a Greek word meaning 'anointed one'. In the Old Testament, the act of anointing made someone a king, priest, or sometimes even a prophet. And so Jesus, the 'anointed one', is the One whom the Father has chosen to fulfill the Covenant promises that He made with David, that David's kingdom would endure forever. Jesus is not just a prophet like John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah; He is the King of the new and everlasting Kingdom of God. He is also a priest, although He will not fully reveal His priesthood until the Last Supper and the Cross.

But as we heard in our 1st reading, every good King needs a trustworthy Prime Minister, to conduct His affairs when He is away. So Jesus bestows the "keys" to His new and everlasting kingdom on a most unlikely candidate: Simon. So profound is this bestowal of authority that Jesus even changes Simon's name to symbolize this new mission. From now on, He will be known as *Peter*, from the Greek *Petros*, which comes from the Aramaic *Kepha*, which means "Rock." *And upon this rock—upon Peter, Jesus says—I will build my Church—my new Kingdom, in fulfillment of the promise God made to King David so long ago. Here is also the basis of what we believe about the papacy—the successor of St. Peter.*

In effect, Jesus is saying: *"look Peter: for a thousand years your people have been waiting for a Messiah to deal with Israel's enemies, gather the scattered tribes of Jacob, and reign on the throne of David in everlasting peace. Well, Good News: I'm that guy—I'm the one you have been waiting for! And in fact, this kingdom is so much more than what you and your people have been waiting for—this Kingdom is actually the Kingdom of God come down to earth, and I, who am the Son of God, I am your King! And you, my fisherman friend, you are my prime minister. I will give you unparalleled authority to act in my name: "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." In*

other words, the decisions you make on earth, God Himself will ratify! In that sense, God is binding himself to you!" If you really think about that, it's incredible!

It is a degree of authority that no one could ever dare to take upon himself, let alone make up. Which really brings us to the heart of the controversy of the papacy: could God possibly come so close to us mere sinful creatures as to bestow the keys to His Kingdom on one of us? I think part of some people's denial of the primacy of the Pope is that it can make them uncomfortable to realize that God can choose to work through us sinful people in such a direct way. But from the earliest days of the Church, those who cling to the Catholic and Apostolic faith have believed that God does come this close. For 2,000 years, the Chair of St. Peter has been filled in the Church by both Saints and scoundrels. And yet through it all, the Lord's promise is ever true: the gates of hell have not prevailed against Her.

And this brings us back to Simon's new name: Peter, or Rock. Why did Jesus choose to name him "Rock" of all things? We know nothing Jesus ever said and did was without reason. Well, rocks certainly are a staple of the geography of the Middle East. But looking at the Old Testament context, rocks were symbols of stability, strength, and refuge. They were used to offer sacrifices. God performed a miracle of salvation for the people at the rock at Mt. Horeb. When Moses struck the rock with his staff, water burst forth for the people to drink. And so the Church, founded on Peter is to be a place of stability, strength, refuge, sacrifice, and refreshment.

And yet we know that Peter, only a little while later, would fail miserably in the hour of his greatest test. When the going was easy, Peter easily confesses the truth of Jesus' identity as the Christ, the Son of God. But when the going gets tough—on the night of His passion—we know Peter denies this same confession three times: *I do not know the man!* Which is probably why, after His resurrection, Jesus reverts back to the name *Simon* when he asks him three times, *Simon, son of John, do you love me?* This is not to say that Peter ceased to be Rock when he denied the Lord, but that the Lord had to remind Peter that his exalted role rests upon his confession of the true faith—the true identity of Jesus Christ—a confession that God the Father Himself revealed to Simon Peter. Which is why the Pope cannot say or do just anything he wishes and then force us to believe—the Pope's authority rests on his fidelity to the unchanging faith of the Church, founded by Christ.

So what does all of this mean for us? First, I would say it should inspire profound gratitude that the Lord has called each of us to be part of His one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church. That we don't have to wander looking for the truth, because we are already home. Next, to pray that the Pope may always be faithful to the enormous weight of his noble calling, and the Catholic Church, both universally and our own Parish here, may indeed be a place of stability, strength, refuge, sacrifice, and refreshment. And finally, a reminder that our church is not only the heart of this community, but that the Church is the heart of the world, and a call to do all we can to love and serve Her until our Lord comes again.