

## **TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

*Gospel: Matthew 16:13-20*

When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

### **REFLECTION 1: POPE FRANCIS – PETER’S SUCCESSOR**

We need to go to the scriptures again and again to know what God wants of us. We need to know what God’s love is asking of us here and now in our own culture, language and circumstances. The readings for today, the 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday of the year provide a good example of how complex our search is as we look at one of the most contested passages in the Gospels – Peter’s identification of Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus calls Peter the ‘Rock’ on which he will build his church and gives Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven – an authority that includes the power to bind and loose in the here and hereafter.

While Jesus is still giving Peter the keys of the kingdom, our minds reflect on papal primacy and apostolic succession. These historical developments went beyond the evangelist’s concern. It is only in hindsight that this scene at Caesarea Philippi becomes important as the church emerges from its early roots in Palestine to become Christendom. Comparing the evangelist Matthew (Matt 16) to the same scene in the Gospel of Mark (Mk 8) both show Peter as professing that Jesus is the Messiah, but Mark says nothing about a special selection of Peter as leader. Matthew who wrote his Gospel much later wants the emerging Christian community to understand itself as formed by the earthly Jesus to continue his work and so Matthew uses Peter to point to the divine at work in the newly formed community.

Shortly before the events related in today’s Gospel, the Pharisees and Sadducees accuse Jesus of not following the law. They ask, ‘Why do your disciples break the traditions of the elders?’ – like not washing their hands before meals. Jesus in turn asks them, ‘Why do you break the commandments of God for the sake of your traditions?’ Today’s Gospel passage emphasizes the formation of a new community in response to the Jewish leaders’ rejection of Jesus’ ministry and his divine identity made known through Peter. We are perhaps moving into a time similar to that addressed by Matthew. Something new is emerging. Pope Francis seems to be bringing us to look again at these same questions in the signs of the times today. He reads these signs in ways that do not condemn even when questioning and challenging. He values mercy more than power.

‘Who do you say I am?’ asks Jesus. Pope Francis might answer that question by saying, ‘You are the Messiah, the one who is sent to us as a gateway to the kingdom of God’. Francis would humbly add, ‘I am not the Rock, but rather Peter’s testimony continuing through the church, the people of God, the realm of God on earth as in heaven’.

## REFLECTION 2:

## 'KEEPERS OF KEYS'

If you ever visited St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, you couldn't but be awe-struck by the huge lettering from today's Gospel (Matt. 16: 13-20) in Latin 'You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church'. Each individual letter is over six feet high and encircles the interior of the vast building. Strange, but these words are only to be found in Matthew's Gospel, but so valued are they that they give meaning to the role of the Popes, Peter being the first, Christ's vicar on Earth. Whatever a Pope bound on Earth would be considered bound in heaven. This leads to Papal Infallibility which I leave for another day.

Now I would like to emphasise that other emblem that looms large on the walls of that Roman basilica, the crossed keys. Keys are a symbol of power and authority, lose a set of keys and one is stranded. The story is told of an American family who went off on a picnic to a secluded beauty spot. The father of the family simply threw the bunch of keys, containing his car key, on the roof of the family car, and went with his wife and family to explore their new surroundings. On returning, the keys were missing, a search around was fruitless – where had they gone? Nobody except family were around. Years later an ornithologist contacted the family and returned the keys; a magpie had taken them to her nest where they remained over the years!

The incident highlights the importance of keys. Ancient keys were oversized, measuring two feet in length and borne on the shoulder. Only one key is mentioned in the first reading having a symbolic significance – the one who wore the key had the king's ear. Keys open and close signifying Peter's relationship with Jesus – that relationship hinged upon Peter's faith, a faith described as God-given: 'flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father'. That faith and their relationship empowered Peter with the grace he needed to serve the followers of Jesus as their leader. Peter's position of authority was signified by the symbolic keys Jesus was handing over to him. Under Peter's leadership and that of others who shared his stewardship, were able to survive the aftermath of Jesus' death and all the conflicting cultures that followed on the post resurrection period.

Notice how Peter's confession of faith is placed by the Evangelist at the end of a larger section concerning the special instruction of the disciples. Peter's declaration of faith illustrates the goal of all ministry: to lead others to faith by the witness of one's lived belief.

The conferring of the keys of the kingdom of heaven referred to the authority to admit or exclude and so the popular tradition regarding Peter as the doorkeeper at the 'pearly gates'. As chief missionary of the good news, it will be Peter's joyful task to lead many to God – through his efforts, he will open the doors to life. God, through Jesus and through Peter and company, was opening the gates of the kingdom. In next Sunday's Gospel, Peter's confession of faith will quickly be put to the test. Perhaps it is because he has allowed us to see him, warts and all, that Peter remains an experienced and trusted advisor for those who would lead in Jesus' name.