

THE FIRST POPE

Homily for 21ST Sunday Ordinary Time

Year A

Is 22:19-23; Ps 138; Rom 11:33-36; Mt 16:13-20

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Travel with me today as we trace the footsteps of Jesus and His disciples in the Gospel reading. Our 2-day journey on foot begins at the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee, traverses 30 miles due North over a mountainous trail, and ends in Caesarea Philippi where we find the headwaters of the Jordan River flowing back to the South and emptying into the Sea of Galilee. This pagan town, whose modern name is Banyas, used to be called Paneas, named after Pan, the pagan god of sheep and shepherds.

Here we find a huge rock, 500' long and 100' high, where Jesus brought His disciples to teach them. Now Jesus often used props and backdrops with which He could make His point in His teachings. He brought them all the way to that huge rock in Caesarea Philippi so He could use that as a backdrop for His establishing the papacy and naming our first Pope. Jesus uses 3 ingredients in the making of the first Pope: faith—a rock—and a set of keys.

The first ingredient...faith... Today's reading from Matthew 16 is one of the most important passages for Holy Mother Church.

It was there in Caesarea Philippi that Jesus asked His disciples:

“*Who do you say that I am?*” It was Simon Peter who answered, not from his own mind—not from flesh and blood—but by a revelation from God: “*You are the Christ [Messiah], the Son of the living God.*”

[Mt 16:15-16] Thus, Simon Peter defined Jesus, and it’s a definition we still use today, 2000 years later. When Jesus heard Simon Peter’s words, He in turn defined Simon Peter by saying: “*You are Rock, [with a capital R] and on this rock [with a little r] I will build My Church.*” [Mt 16:18]

The second ingredient...a rock.... Peter’s name had always been Simon, but now Jesus gives him a new name. We lose some of the meaning in the English when we say, “*You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church*”; but those original listeners would have heard Jesus say: “*You are Kepha, and on this kepha, I will build My Church.*” Peter is the rock; he’s the foundation. It’s Jesus who is the architect and the builder.

Now, this name change was no small matter. In Semitic culture and in the Bible itself, a change of name is a very significant event, redefining a person’s purpose and identity. Take Abraham

for example. He was called “Abram”, which in Hebrew means father. But when he was given the covenant, God changed his name to “Abraham”—the father of nations. A similar meaning is attributed to God’s renaming Jacob to Israel after his wrestling match with God, and Saul to Paul on the Damascus Road. So, when Jesus gave Simon the new name, Peter (or foundation Rock), it made a world of difference to the disciples who heard it. It defined who Peter was and determined his role in the Church.

OK, back to the huge rock in Caesarea Philippi...at the face of that rock, was a temple, the ruins of which we can still see today. Pagan worship took place there. Behind the pagan temple was a large cave, full of water. The ancient historian, Josephus, tells us that it was a horrible precipice down into the water that appeared bottomless. It was here that the pagans would offer their living sacrifices by hurling them down into this great abyss. Some even viewed this great cave as the “gates of hell”. Josephus goes on to tell us in the 1st Century that this temple was built by Herod in honor of

Caesar Augustus, and that Pagans came there to offer sacrifice and claim Caesar as lord.

So then, it was in this setting that Jesus proclaimed Peter to be the rock foundation of the Church...and the contrast is clear. Here in Caesarea Philippi is a false temple, built on a false rock, to a false lord. But Jesus says that the true Church is built on the true rock of Peter, and that He, Jesus, the architect and builder, is the true Lord! And His Church, Jesus promises, shall overcome the “gates of hell”!

That brings us to Jesus’ final papal ingredient—the keys...ah yes, the keys: “*I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.*” [Mt 16:19] Jesus chooses the royal language of kings and empires to invoke that particular image of governance for His Church. The “key” to the establishment of the Papacy is found in the “keys”...for you see, he who holds the “keys” holds the authority...in this case the royal authority of Christ Himself, the King of Kings, and the head of the Church.

We find precedence in today’s OT reading from Isaiah where the Lord gives the keys of the House of David to His new Master of

the Palace [*Eliakim replaces Shebna*]. In a monarchy, the king would appoint a cabinet of ministers, one of whom would be his prime minister—second in rank to the king himself. Jesus appointed the apostles as His “cabinet” of ministers and St. Peter as His “prime” minister. The symbol of the prime minister’s authority from the king was the keys to the king’s household, entrusted to him by the king himself. Peter is thus invested with Christ’s authority as chief teacher and administrator of the kingdom—the Church. Through St. Peter and his successors, heaven itself governs the Church on earth. The Pope becomes the Vicar of Christ...the holder of the keys.

So, we ask, what does all this mean to us here, today? Well, as we approach the table of the New Covenant spread before us, we can do five things: First, we can be assured that our Church is being governed as Jesus intended Her to be...with His authority, exercised in brotherly service, invested in our bishops and their head, the Bishop of Rome, who’s seated in the office of St. Peter. We can then pray earnestly and fervently for our Pope and all

bishops, especially our own ordinary. Second, we can respond faithfully and positively, in the example of St. Peter, to the same question Jesus poses to each one of us: “Who do you say that I am?” Third, we ourselves can be living stones—“rocks” if you will—upon whom Jesus can depend to fortify and grow the Church. Third, we can identify with the children of God from Abraham to now who are baptized in water, led by the “Rock”, and fed with spiritual food. And finally, as St. Paul tells us in today’s epistle to the Romans, we can exclaim the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God; and we can share in today’s Psalmist’s thanksgiving for the Lord’s eternal love and implore Him in the work of His hands.

May Jesus Christ be praised...now and forever!

May God Bless You All!