

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

(Isaiah 22:19-23; Romans 11:33-36; Matthew 16:13-20)

Peter the Rock

Peter the apostle is a gusty and impulsive man with a big heart. And he is an ordinary man with ordinary shortcomings. But he is the rock on which the Church of Christ is built.

The gospel reading of two weeks ago tells how Peter, after seeing Jesus walking on the water, wants to do the same during the storm (Mt 14:22-33). Scripture scholars say that walking on the water symbolizes God's creative act that brings order to chaos. We can certainly understand Jesus walking on the water. But it is absurd to imagine Peter walking on the water. Peter is that gusty and impatient man.

The gospel reading today is called Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi. From this Gentile town in northern Palestine, Jesus begins his long journey to Jerusalem. After having avoided the crowd, Jesus devotes himself exclusively to the twelve disciples. He is about to reveal the true nature of the Messiah and the mystery of the passion. So Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Jesus wants to confirm his own divine son-ship. Multiple answers float.

Jesus singles out Peter and asks, "Who do you think that I am?" Jesus does not ask, "Who am I?" or "Do you know who I am?" It is an existential question that will provide the ultimate meaning of life to both Jesus and Peter. Peter answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." However, Peter does not yet understand what the Messiah really means.

What is more surprising is what Jesus says next to Peter. Reaching out to Peter, Jesus says compassionately, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah... You are the Rock, and on this rock I will build my church." Two weeks ago, Jesus called Peter a man of "little faith" when he tried to walk on water. Today, Jesus says that he will build the Church of Christ upon Peter, the Rock, as fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah (Isa 28:16). Obviously, there seems to be inconsistency in Jesus' dealings with Peter, because Jesus is going to build the Church on the man who has "little faith."

Peter is an ordinary man. He is gusty and impulsive, but ordinary. Yet he has a big heart for his people, and his faith will grow. Peter does not understand the true nature of the Messiah, so he will betray Jesus three times during the passion (Mt

26:69-75). It is only after encountering the risen Jesus that Peter understands the true nature of the Messiah and becomes the fearless preacher of the Gospel of Christ. It is only through the death and resurrection of Jesus that Peter becomes the apostle among apostles.

Let us imagine or at least conjecture, if we can, how Jesus takes on the situation in Caesarea Philippi. Jesus must have confidence in Peter, hoping that he will eventually understand and follow him. Jesus knows that he must make a journey to Jerusalem to lay the foundation for God's kingdom. He must build the Church as an extension of his body. So Jesus is not asking, but begging Peter. This is the way how God works for human salvation. We also remember that God asked Mary's consent for His incarnation.

Fr. Raymond Brown speaks of three special occasions that Jesus grants to Peter in the Gospel of Matthew: First, Peter is rescued from drowning during the storm. Second, Peter is designated as the Rock for the Church of Christ. Third, Peter denies Jesus three times during Jesus' passion. These are privileged moments for Peter, who is intimately associated with Jesus and subsequently raises Jesus' blood pressure. Eventually, we know that Peter became the apostle among apostles. This is the Divine Paradox.

Peter is an ordinary man: he believes in doubt and suspicion; he hopes through failure and frustration; he loves in the midst of hatred and rejection. Peter also knows his own weakness and the redeeming love of God. But we are ordinary persons with flaws, faults, and even sinfulness. We, too, are loved and chosen by God. God always chooses ordinary persons like you and me. †

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