

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 22:19-23
<i>Response</i>	Lord, your love is eternal; do not forsake the work of your hands.
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalm 138:1-2, 2-3, 6, 8
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 11:33-36
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 16:13-20

The 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year A is a very special Sunday. For me in particular, because this passage from the Gospel of Matthew has proven pivotal for me and my understanding not just of the Jewish roots of Christianity, but of the Jewish roots of Catholicism in particular. This Sunday we read the famous account of Jesus conferring the keys of the kingdom upon Peter and changing his name from Simon to Peter, the rock upon which he would build his church. So I want to look at this passage with you in detail. Many Catholics are familiar with it, but I want to try to put it back in its first century Jewish context, to clarify the meaning of Jesus's words to Peter, and then show you how in this Sunday in particular, the Old Testament really sheds light on the Jewish roots of the institution of the papacy and how it goes back not just to Peter, but to Jesus's will for Peter as the leader of the 12 disciples and as the leader of the Church. So let's begin with Matthew 16:13-20, the gospel for this Sunday. It says this:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesare'a Philip'pi, he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Eli'jah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not

prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.¹

As usual with the Gospel of Matthew there is a lot going on in this passage. So let's walk through it step-by-step and unpack it in its first century context. First question! Notice that it opens with the question of the identity of Jesus which Jesus himself poses as a question: "who do people say that the Son of Man is?" So if you recall in the gospel, the Son of Man is Jesus's favorite way of referring to himself. He frequently calls himself the Son of Man, so in a sense he is asking the apostles: who do people say that I am? And in response they give him basically a kind of sample of the confusion that's out there about the identity of Jesus. "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Now one of the interesting things about that list is that all of those people are dead. John the Baptist: dead. Elijah: dead. Jeremiah: dead...for a really long time. All the other prophets: dead for centuries. So why are these the suggestions that people are coming up with? Well it's because they recognize that Jesus is in some sense superhuman, that he's got supernatural powers, and they assume that he must be like the spirit of one of these prophets come back from the dead or like Elijah come down from heaven, because of his supernatural powers and his supernatural identity. So they recognize he's no ordinary man. So they make all these different proposals and of course none of those is adequate. None of them is correct. They don't get at the real mystery of Jesus's identity.

So Jesus turns to them and says, "well who do you say that I am?" And notice what happens. Simon Peter speaks on behalf of the 12. This is the second key point. Over and over again in the Gospels, Simon emerges as the leader of the 12 Apostles. If you look at tabulations of the number of times people were named in the New Testament, Jesus is obviously named the most frequently in the Gospels. They are about him, the biographies of Jesus. But who is second? In terms of frequency it's Peter, both in the Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles, because he

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

is unquestionably the leader of the 12 disciples, and he frequently will speak on behalf of the other apostles, on behalf of the 12. And the same thing happens here when Jesus asked them, “who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter steps in the gap and says, “you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Now in context, Simon's response is a kind of twofold affirmation. On the one hand he is saying you are the Christ — the Greek word there is *Christos*. I've mentioned it in other videos, it literally means “the anointed one”. It is the Greek word for *mashiach*, a Hebrew expression meaning Messiah”, anointed one, the term that was used to describe the anointed king of Israel. So, on the one hand, Peter is affirming Jesus is the Messiah, but it isn't just an affirmation of his messianic identity. He says “you are the Christ, the son of the living God,” and many scholars recognize in those words that Peter goes beyond Messiahship to Jesus' Divine Sonship, and you can see this from Jesus's response to Peter's words when he says, “Blessed are you Simon Bar-Jonah,” which just means Simon, son of Jonah. It's an indication that Peter's father's name is Jonah or Johannes or some form of that. “Simon son of Jonah, flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” In other words, what Jesus is saying to Peter is, you did not grasp the mystery of my identity as the son of God by means of your own power. It isn't because Peter was so smart. It isn't because Peter was always right...he certainly wasn't. He often made mistakes. It's because God chose to reveal to him, the Father chose to reveal to him the mystery of Jesus' divine Sonship, the mystery of his identity as the Christ, the son of the living God.

In response to that revelation, to Peter's revelation, Jesus goes on to say some things that are extremely important, extremely consequential, for the whole history of the Church, and the history of the Papacy in particular. And he makes several basic points about Peter that we want to highlight. First, he changes his name. Second, he speaks about building his church on Peter. Third, he gives Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And then fourth, he gives Peter the power to bind and loose. So in order to understand what's happening here and how this text is laying the foundation for the Jewish roots of the Papacy, we need to look at each one of those images in context: Peter's name change, the building of the Church, the keys of the kingdom, and the the binding and loosing (the power to bind and loose). So let's go through them step by step. Number one, Jesus changes Simon's name to Peter. So although Peter is frequently called Peter in the Gospels, as becomes clear in this passage and elsewhere, his birth name, his Jewish name, was

Simon. Simon is a Greek form of Simeon. He was one of the 12 sons of Jacob, a very prominent figure in ancient Israel, and a very common name for Jewish boys. So Simon's name, Simeon, was how he would normally have been referred to by his parents, his family, his friends and occasionally even by the apostles and Jesus in the Gospels themselves. And at this moment, Jesus says to Simeon, "you are now Peter." He changes his name. Now the Greek word there for Peter is *petros* and it literally means "rock". So this is the first time that we know of where someone receives the name "Rock". So in modern America we all know the image of Sylvester Stallone and Rocky...his name was Rocky, so too now Simon gets the name "Rock", Jesus changes his name. Why does that matter? Well because if you know Judaism, and if you know the Old Testament Scriptures, you'll know that whenever God changes someone's name it's always a momentous occasion. Think here of Abraham. Originally his name was Abram. It meant "exalted father" yet he had no children, so God changes his name to Abraham which means "father of a multitude". Why does he do that? Because it reveals who Abram is in the eyes of God and what role he's going to play in the history of salvation. Although his birth name was Abram, exalted father, he's actually going to become the father of a multitude. He's going to become the father of all the peoples of the earth. And so God changes his name to reflect that role that he has in salvation history. And the same thing is true with other name changes that you'll find.

So when Jesus does this to Peter it signifies who he is in the eyes of God and what his role is going to be in the history of salvation. So Simon is now going to become *petros*, "the rock". Why? What is his role in salvation? Well Jesus goes on to say, "because on this rock I will build my Church." So there's a second image there. Now before we can look at that image carefully, I just want to deal with a point of confusion that's out there sometimes. Many non-Catholic Christians, often times Protestants, especially in the United States, will make an argument that Jesus is not actually referring to Peter as the rock upon which he will build his Church because if you look at the Greek words, Peter's name is *Petros*, but then when Jesus talks about the rock that he will build his Church on, the Greek word is *petra*. So if you want to hear it in Greek it would go like this: "you are *petros* and on this *petra* I will build my Church." So some Protestant commentators will say, "Aha! Look at the difference there!" *Petros* is the masculine form of the word. It refers to a stone or rock, but *petra*, some will say, is the feminine form and it means a little pebble or something like that. So they'll

say Peter and the rock are not the same, they're two different things. Other critics will say that when Jesus says *petra* he is referring to himself and not to Peter. These are evasive maneuvers that are not actually authentically interpreting the text as it stands because the reality is that there are two different words in the Greek, two different genders. *Petros* is masculine, *petra* is feminine, but the reason for that is not because Peter's not the rock. The reason for that is because Peter is a man. In other words, if Jesus is going to give Peter the name "Rock" in the Greek of Matthew's Gospel, it has to be put in the form *petros*, because the masculine form *petros* is the only name you can give to a man. For example, if I had a son and I wanted to name him after St. Joseph I call him Joseph. I don't call him Josephine. I would call my daughter Josephine if I wanted to name her in honor of St. Joseph, because Joseph is the masculine form, Josephine is the feminine form of the name. The same thing is true in Greek for *petros* and *petra*. *Petros* is the masculine form that Jesus gives to Peter as his name, but *petra*, which was the common form of the word rock, was a feminine noun. It doesn't have anything to do with human genders, just the natural gender of different words in the Greek language. I can't go into all the details about that, just trust me. When you talked about a rock you would talk about rocks using the feminine form of the word *petra*. So although there is a difference in gender in the two words, there is no difference in meaning.

Before I move on, just one more point here. Matthew's Gospel is written in Greek, so there is this difference in gender and the words *petros* and *petra*, but if most scholars are correct in assuming that Jesus would have spoken to Peter in Aramaic, then there actually wouldn't be a difference because there is only one word for rock in Aramaic, and one form, and that word is Cepha or Cephas, which is just the Aramaic word meaning rock. So if Jesus is speaking to Peter originally in Aramaic there will be no difference. He would say "you are Cephas and on this Cephas I will build my Church", or "you are Cepha and on this Cepha I will build my Church." So the point is, there's no way to get around the fact here that Jesus is renaming Peter and identifying him as the rock whether it's in Greek or in Aramaic.

Now with that said we can move to the second point. Jesus says, "On this rock I will build my Church." Well, we have to do a little more Greek study here. What does the word church mean? Now, when most of us hear the English word "church," we tend to think first and foremost of a building, a sanctuary, a church

building. Or maybe we'll think of the institution of the Church. In the original Greek, the word church simply means assembly. It's from two Greek words *ek kaléō* "to call out". You put them together you get *ecclesia*, "the assembly". It was used in Old Testament times in the Greek translation of the Bible to refer to the assembly of Israel. They would be called out of their homes and called together into the temple, especially to worship the Lord. So what Jesus here is describing is Peter as the foundation of his assembly, of his Church that he is going to establish, this new Israel, in a sense, this new assembly of God. Now why does that matter? It is very interesting because if *ecclesia* as a church is tied to the Temple in Jerusalem, one of the things ancient Jews would've known was that there was a very important rock in the Temple in Jerusalem. It was called the *even shetiah*, the foundation stone. And you see this in ancient rabbinic writings like the Mishna, which contains traditions from the time of Jesus that say that in the holy of holies there was a special stone, the foundation stone, where the Ark of the covenant used to be before it was taken away by Jeremiah at the time of the Babylonian exile. So that at the time of Jesus, whenever the high priest would go into the temple to offer sacrifice, because there was no ark, he would actually sprinkle the blood of the day of atonement on the foundation stone, on the *even shetiah*. It was kind of the foundation of the Temple and the foundation of the *ecclesia*, of the Assembly of God's people, worshipping the Lord in the Temple. So when Jesus says to Peter, "you are rock and on this rock I will build my assembly, my *ecclesia*," he's doing nothing less than talking about the church as a new temple, which, if you recall from other videos we've seen, Isaiah and other people prophesy about. One day there would be this new temple of God, this new place of worship, in this case the new temple of God, is centered not just on Jesus but also on Peter as a foundation.

So first his name changed, second his foundational role in the Church, and then third, the fact that he's given the keys of the kingdom. What would that have meant in a first century Jewish context? Now in my experience teaching this over the years I've noticed that many Catholics basically stop at Peter's identification with the rock. In other words, once they've seen that Peter is the rock upon which Christ will build the Church, they kind of act as if the passage ends there. They don't go into much depth about the next two images, the keys and the binding and loosing, but for my purposes here I actually think those are some of the most important images that may even be more important because of what they meant within the first century Jewish context. So when Jesus says to Peter, "I give you

the keys of the kingdom of heaven” what did that mean? What would that have meant? and “I give you the power to bind and loose, so that whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven, whatever you loose on earth is loosed in heaven.” Well, unfortunately in our day and time, one of those images has basically been reduced to the status of jokes. So whenever you hear a joke about heaven what do you see? Peter is at the pearly gates. Why? Because he has the keys of the kingdom of heaven so he'll let you into heaven at the end of time or at your final judgment. Well that is not what this would have meant in a first century Jewish setting. In fact, if you want to understand what it means, Jesus is alluding to a very specific passage from the Old Testament. And guess what that passage is? Isaiah 22, which is the first reading for today's mass. So let's go back to the Old Testament and we'll put it into context by actually looking at the first reading.

So, in Isaiah chapter 22, the reading for today is verses 19 through 23. Now let me put this in context for a second before I read it. What Isaiah is describing here is the kingdom of David about 800 years before the time of Jesus. At that time there was a certain office in the kingdom that was second only to the King. So you had the Royal Davidic king, he was the leader of the people, but second in command to him was this figure called the *al bayith*. I know I'm using a lot of Greek and Hebrew today but I can't help it, you have to get into the meaning of this. The *al bayith* literally meant the “over the house”. In other words, he was the one who was the leader over the house of David. After the king, he had full authority and he was second in rank only to the King. Now Isaiah here is speaking to...let's call him the Prime Minister, how about that as a kind of modern analogy...he's like the Prime Minister of the kingdom of David. So in this case Isaiah is speaking to the Prime Minister of the kingdom of David. His name is Shebna. Now Shebna has been a wicked prime minister and therefore he is going to die and the office is going to be given to somebody else. That man's name is Eliakim. So I want you to read the passage with me with that in mind and watch the images Isaiah uses to describe the office of the Prime Minister or the “over the house”. This is what Isaiah says, chapter 22, verse 19 (he is speaking here to Shebna, the wicked Prime Minister):

I will thrust you from your office, and you will be cast down from your station. In that day I will call my servant Eli'akim the son of Hilki'ah, and I will clothe him with your robe, and will bind your girdle on him, and will

commit your authority to his hand; and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open. And I will fasten him like a peg in a sure place, and he will become a throne of honor to his father's house.

What does that mean? What does any of that mean? Well, what Isaiah is doing is prophesying to Shebna that the office of prime minister is going to be taken away from him and passed on to Eliakim. Now what's important about that? Well, several things. Number one, notice that the office of prime minister is exactly that. It's an office. Which means it doesn't stop with the death of one man. It gets passed down person-to-person throughout the centuries. There's an office that has succession, in other words. First point.

Second point, how do you know who holds this particular office of Prime Minister? Well there are two key symbols. First, he has the keys. So if you want to know who the Prime Minister is, he has the key of the house of David. Why? Well because the key is a symbol of authority. So if, for example, I was going to go away on vacation and I wanted to put you in authority over my house while I was gone, to put it under your responsibility, what do I do? Well I would give you the keys to my house, and by giving you the keys I'm basically saying, "I entrust it to you. You are in charge while I'm gone." The same thing was true of the Prime Minister. The fact that he had the key of the house of David meant that the king had entrusted royal authority over the kingdom to him. He was second in rank only to the king. So it's an office. You know he's got the office because he has the key of the house of David.

Third, his role as prime minister is to be a father to the Kingdom. Now you might think "wait, isn't the king the father of the kingdom?" Well, yes, but the Prime Minister, in a sense, participates in the fatherhood of the king. So he will act as a father to the kingdom by leading it, and governing it, and guiding it. One reason this is important is because, of course, the root for the word Pope is Papa. So when we call someone the Pope we are literally referring to them as the father of the church. We'll come back to that in a little bit. So he will have the role of father.

Fourth, and finally, but by no means least significant, it says that when the prime minister opens, none shall shut, and when he shuts, none shall open. What does that mean? That's an expression of his ruling authority over the people. In other words, he has binding authority. It's not just symbolic authority. He has the power to make final decisions. If he decides something is open, then no one can shut it. If he decides something is shut, no one can open it. It's a kind of symbol of his teaching authority. So he has the power to make binding decisions. This is fascinating when you look at this because what's already being described in the kingdom of David is someone who is second in rank to the king, has the key of the house of David, acts as a father to the entire kingdom and has royal authority to make binding decisions on the entire kingdom.

Now fast-forward to the New Testament. What is Jesus doing in Matthew 16? He is making Peter the Prime Minister of the kingdom of God. He is giving Peter the office of the *al bayith*, of the “over the house” of his church. That means that Peter has all of the same characteristics. Number one, he's second in rank only to who? Jesus himself, the King. Number two, he's given the key of royal authority over the Church, which means that he has power over the Church that is second only to Christ. Third, as Prime Minister he acts as a father to the Church, which is why it became customary very quickly in the ancient Church to refer to him, the Bishop of Rome, as Papa, as the Pope. Fourth, is the power to make binding decisions, he has teaching authority over the Church. This is actually a little clearer in the Gospels because when Jesus says, “whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven, whatever you loose on earth is loosed in heaven,” by the first century A.D., those were technical terms that the rabbis used to refer to authoritative teaching. So if someone would bind something that meant that they taught something that everyone had to believe, and if they would loose it, then they would allow people to have a diversity of opinion about it. You can actually see this in the Gospel of Matthew itself. In Matthew 23, Jesus says the Pharisees bind heavy burdens that people aren't able to bear. They themselves don't carry them, but they don't lift a finger to help anyone else. The language there of binding heavy burdens is the language of the Pharisees' teaching authority, that they would teach others, that their teachings were considered binding in the first century. Well now what is Jesus doing? He's transferring that power of teaching authority from the Jewish teachers to Peter himself, whatever Peter binds on earth is bound in heaven, whatever Peter looses on earth is loosed in heaven. Now that is radical. Notice

what Jesus says here. He doesn't say whatever heaven decides Peter will agree with. He says whatever Peter teaches will be ratified by God in heaven, it's a radical authority to teach that Jesus is giving to Peter when he gives him the power to bind and to loose.

And then finally, but by no means least significantly, if Jesus is making — this is so important — if Jesus is making Peter the Prime Minister of the kingdom of God, if Jesus is alluding to Isaiah 22, which is the only text that has all these parallels with Matthew 16, then by definition the authority that he's now giving to Peter as the rock isn't going to stop with Peter, because it's not just Peter's power, it's an office. And just like after Shebna died the office passed to Eliakim in the first reading, so now after Peter dies, the office, and the authority, and the power, and the role as father and the keys are going to be passed on to Peter's successor as Bishop of Rome. And those successors of Peter, the Bishops of Rome are going to become what we call today the Popes. Why? Well, because they're the fathers of the Church, they act as fathers to the universal Church, second in rank to Christ, the King himself. So as you can see here, although many people will say that the papacy is a medieval invention, or that the word Pope isn't anywhere in the Bible, and therefore Catholics are un-biblical in assuming that the Pope has the supreme authority over the Church on earth, nothing could be further from the truth. If you look at the New Testament in its Jewish context, you can see very clearly here that Jesus is establishing Peter as the first Pope. Now, you don't take my word for this. In order to kind of confirm this I want to share something interesting with you. This is a commentary on the Gospel of Matthew written by two Protestant scholars named W.D. Davies and Dale Allison. This came out in the 1990s and it's widely regarded as one of the most exhaustive and authoritative commentaries--modern commentaries--on the Gospel of Matthew, and this is what these two Protestant scholars say about Matthew 16. I will quote them here:

The major opinion of modern exegetes, which has it that Peter, as a sort of supreme rabbi or prime minister of the kingdom, is in Matthew 16:19 given teaching authority, given that is the power to declare what is permitted and what is not permitted.

He gives a reference here to the rabbinic expressions binding and loosing, and then it says this:

Peter can decide by doctrinal decision what Christians must and must not do. This is the traditional Roman Catholic understanding, with the proviso that Peter had successors.²

Notice what they're saying here, these are two modern prominent Protestant scholars on the Gospel, experts on Gospel Matthew, saying that today most scholars recognize that in Matthew 16 Jesus is making Peter the supreme rabbi and prime minister over the Church, who can tell Christians what they must and must not do, and what they can believe and what they must not believe. In other words, who has binding authority in matters of faith and morals, and they admit that the traditional Roman Catholic interpretation of this passage is right, with one proviso, that Peter had successors. So they don't agree that Peter had successors here, they think that is the Catholic view, but as I just showed you, if they are right and Peter is the prime minister, then by definition he has to have successors, because Isaiah 22, the entire point of that passage is that the office of prime minister moves from one man to the other. When Shebna dies it goes to Eliakim, and when Eliakim dies it goes to his successors. So if Jesus is in fact making Peter prime minister, then he would have known as a Jew — not just as Son of God, but just as a Jewish person — that he was establishing an office to which there would be successors after Peter had died.

And sure enough, I'll close by going to the living tradition of the Church. If we go back to a much older commentary, the writings of St. Irenaeus, in the second century A.D., St. Irenaeus, he was Bishop of Lyons, a very famous Bishop, writer and martyr, in his famous work *Against Heresies*, which was about 180 A.D., this is what he had to say about the office of the Bishop of Rome as the foundations of the Church. It's a long quote, but it's worth reading. Think about this, this was written in 180 A.D., before the end of second century, almost 2000 years ago, St. Irenaeus wrote this about the Church at Rome and Peter's successors:

[T]he very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul; as also the faith preached to men... comes down to our time by means of the

² W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *Matthew 8-18* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2005), 638.

successions of the bishops. For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church [meaning the Church at Rome], on account of its pre-eminent authority, that is, the faithful everywhere... The blessed apostles, then, having founded and built up the Church, committed into the hands of Linus the office of the episcopate [Linus was Peter's successor]... To him succeeded Anacletus; and after him, in the third place from the apostles, Clement ... To this Clement there succeeded Evaristus. Alexander followed Evaristus; then, sixth from the apostles, Sixtus was appointed; after him, Telephorus, who was gloriously martyred; then Hyginus; after him, Pius; then after him, Anicetus. Soter having succeeded Anicetus, Eleutherius does now, in the twelfth place from the apostles, hold the inheritance of the episcopate. In this order, and by this succession, the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles, and the preaching of the truth, have come down. to us. And this is most abundant proof that there is one and the same vivifying faith, which has been preserved in the Church from the apostles until now, and handed down in truth.³

That is pretty remarkable. What Irenaeus is saying is the way we know we have the true faith of the Church is that it's been handed down to us by the 12 bishops who were the successors to Peter in Rome; and that already in the second century there was a recognition that the Church of Rome had primacy among all the churches and that all the faithful everywhere had to agree with it. So this isn't a medieval invention, this is something established by Jesus himself on Peter as the foundation stone of his Church, and it reveals to us that the papacy, far from being a medieval invention, is something that is thoroughly rooted in Judaism and thoroughly rooted in the will and the intention Jesus himself. One last point. Someone might say "well hold on on Dr. Pitre, I thought that Jesus gave the power to bind and loose to the other apostles as well in Matthew 18?" And that's true, he does, they have teaching authority as well. All the bishops, as successors to the Apostles, have teaching authority; however, Jesus only gives the keys of the kingdom to Peter and Peter alone, because Peter and Peter alone is chief of the twelve Apostles and prime minister of the Kingdom of God.

³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.2-3; trans. ANF 1.415-16