



21st Sunday in Ordinary Time



Date: Sunday, August 23, 2020 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** A

First Reading: Isaiah 22:19–23

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 138:1–3, 6, 8 | **Response:** Psalm 138:8bc

Second Reading: Romans 11:33–36

Gospel Acclamation: Matthew 16:18

Gospel Reading: Matthew 16:13–20

Preached at: the Jesuit Institute in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Today we are asked to contemplate authority and to pray for those in authority. Authority is legitimate power, and in our readings today we see how certain individuals are legitimized, and what power is given to them by the ultimate authority, the one whom Peter calls the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, Jesus Christ.

There are two images used in our readings today that originated in the Old Testament, were picked up in the New Testament and continue to be applied to the Christian community even today. Those two images are the rock, and the keys, which represent, I think, the power and the legitimacy of authority.

The rock refers to faith in God – which is the believer’s ‘super-power’ if you will. In the Psalms, God is often referred to as the rock, meaning the foundation that one can depend on unconditionally. God’s Word, especially in Scripture, is seen to be trustworthy. And St Paul tells us that ‘the rock was Christ’ when God’s Word became Flesh. In this morning’s Gospel Jesus allows Simon Peter, and the future leaders of the Church, to share in that quality when he says: “You are the rock, and on this rock I will build my Church”. Christ’s Church will also participate in this quality of unconditional trustworthiness since we’re told that “The gates of hell shall not prevail against her.” But it was not Peter’s own doing that allowed him to recognize Christ, it was his faith, which was a gracious gift from God. Such faith is the foundation upon which Christ builds his Church. So what each of us is being asked to consider this morning is the quality of our own faith. Who do we say Jesus is?

The second image that is used is that of the keys which represent the power to open and close, but notice, it is the keys given to a specific person. No skeleton key exists whereby someone else might also open and close. We believe this applies to all who share in the priestly office derived from the Apostles: only the appointed pastor of a congregation (and his priestly assistants) can have the keys, which he may not lend to or share with anyone. Just as Eliakim in today's first reading was entrusted with the keys over the royal household, Peter was promised the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Implied in this is a responsibility of religious leadership that throughout history has been exercised in the church by bishops and in a special way by the pope.

But as we consider these two images representing faith and authority let us notice three things.

The first is that it is a mistake to believe that if we ever had any doubts, or doubt even now, that somehow our faith is weak. Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is but one element of it. Because the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. For Peter, Jesus recognized that it was not 'flesh and blood' that revealed Christ to him, but Jesus' Father in heaven. If we are looking to increase faith in our life, we must ask God the Father to send us his grace.

The second is to notice how after Jesus gave Peter a new name and this power of the keys, that he still accompanied him. Jesus knew who Peter was and what he would do. Remember Peter would be the man who would later doubt and deny even knowing Jesus, and that is why Jesus forgave him so that his mercy and compassion would be the model for Peter's authority in the Church. His was not a power to rule over, but a strength to serve as Christ did. Let's recall the image of Jesus washing the feet, or suffering for our sake so that we might be saved. That is the example of leadership.

A final point to notice is found in our second reading. Paul concludes his meditation on how God on the last day will act to save not only those who believe in Christ but also the Israelites who had not recognised Jesus. He exults that God is so great in giving this plan of salvation that it is above all human conception. The more we learn about our world, its complexities and grandeur, the more we realise that only God could have revealed Godself to us. Quoting Isaiah (40:13) and perhaps Job (40:3), Paul rhetorically asks just what human could have been so wise as to advise God what to do. Only God's infinite mercy and love could

have bestowed such grace and compassion to be as inclusive as to desire to save all of us. As our understanding has evolved, we have as a Church come to see how God is concerned not just with ourselves, but with all creation. We must care as God cares for us, for as we heard in the Psalm, God's faithfulness and love excel all we ever knew of the God who authentically desires us.

But it is authenticity that makes power legitimate. Just as Jesus was authentic with Peter, and Peter with Jesus, we are invited today to be authentic with God, and to allow God to be authentic with us. We are asked the same question: who do you say I am? Can we listen to God's response to us, that we are his beloved?

Let's pray for leaders, the ones Jesus has legitimised as having the authority to serve God's people; that they might receive God's grace and compassion so that they might share it with us too. Let's pray that they continue to wield the power of the keys to forgive us and to save us, so that the Kingdom of Heaven is opened to us.

Corruption is a scourge not only among leaders in our society but at every level. Let's pray for a conversion and repentance of corruption and all inauthenticity, that just as in the first reading, God will raise up new leaders who will serve him faithfully. Let's pray that all our leaders, might pattern their exercise of power on the one whom we with Peter proclaim to be Jesus the Christ, our Lord and Saviour, and our God.

Amen.

Source: <https://sj.mcharlesworth.fr/homilies/2020-08aug-23-ya-ot-21/>

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