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Thursday of the 18th Week in Ordinary Time

Date: Thursday, August 7, 2025 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** C
First Reading: Numbers 20:1–13
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 95:1–2, 6–9 | **Response:** Psalm 95:8
Gospel Acclamation: Matthew 16:18
Gospel Reading: Matthew 16:13–23
Preached at: the Chapel of Richartz House **in the** Archdiocese of Harare, Zimbabwe.

Dear brothers in Christ,

Today's readings are about rocks—both the rocks we strike in frustration and the Rock upon whom we must build in faith. They speak of what it means to lead with trust, to follow with humility, and to find water not in the expected places but in the unlikely ones: from the hard places of failure, the dry places of fear, and the wounded places of pride.

In our first reading from the Book of Numbers, we find Moses—veteran of miracles, voice of liberation, bearer of burdens—standing again before a thirsty people. The people are angry, parched, nostalgic for slavery. Their thirst has turned to murmuring. But this time, Moses, too, is brittle. He is told to speak to the rock, to let God's mercy flow not through wrath but through trust. Instead, he raises his hand and strikes. Not once, but twice. The rock cracks open, water spills forth, but something deeper fractures. God says, "Because you did not trust in me to show my holiness…" Even Moses—this friend of God—is denied entrance to the Promised Land. Not for lack of leadership, but for a moment's lapse in reverent obedience.

This story is not just about divine punishment—it is a mirror for our own hearts. How often do we strike when we are asked to speak? How often do we lead with anger when God invites us to lead with awe? In this moment, Moses and Aaron step into the pattern of the people: weary of wilderness, wounded by waiting. And God—though still generous—draws a hard line: faith cannot be feigned, and holiness must not be handled carelessly.

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And then comes the psalm, our soul's response: *"O that today you would listen to his voice: harden not your hearts"* (Psalm 95:8). Here we move from physical rock to spiritual stone. The psalm remembers Meribah—the place of quarrelling, of testing God—and pleads with us to remember differently. To soften our hearts. To listen with the inner ear. To let God's voice shape us, rather than the echo of our own complaint.

In the Gospel according to Matthew, we reach the town of Caesarea Philippi, a pagan city built at the foot of Mount Hermon, with shrines to false gods carved into the very rockface. And here, Jesus asks the question that reverberates through time: "Who do you say I am?" Peter, with one breath from the depths of grace, speaks truth: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus replies with a benediction: "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church." From a rocky confession emerges a foundation of mercy. From a humble fisherman, the keys to the Kingdom.

But just moments later, Peter falters. When Jesus foretells his suffering and death, Peter recoils. He cannot accept a Messiah who bleeds. "God forbid it, Lord!" And Jesus, in painful paradox, rebukes the very man he has just blessed: "Get behind me, Satan!" The rock is both foundation and stumbling block. Peter is called not only to confess Christ but to follow him—down into Jerusalem, into suffering, into self-offering.

There is something painfully human in these two stories—Moses, who strikes when he should have spoken, and Peter, who speaks when he should have listened. Leaders, both. Beloved, both. And yet each, in his own way, fails to trust the path of God's mercy. Each tries to seize control rather than surrender.

And what is the lesson for us here in Zimbabwe, in 2025, as we find ourselves thirsting in our own wilderness? In the dry places of broken systems, faltering institutions, economic injustices that force young men to cross borders and young women to bear burdens too great—what does it mean to strike the rock or speak to it? To lead with anger or with faith?

Too often in our parishes and communities, we echo the people of Meribah. We complain, and rightly so, about corruption, about poor services, about promises that turn to dust. But if we do not also cry out to God—not in cynicism, but in faith—we risk hardening our hearts. In our families and congregations, there are

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rocks: resentments, silence, buried griefs. God invites us not to strike them in frustration but to speak, gently, in the hearing of the assembly. To let mercy be visible. Leadership, as Moses shows us, is not just about results—it is about trust, humility, and reverence.

Our Gospel too speaks into this local moment. In a world of shifting identities and contested truths, the question still rings out: *Who do you say that I am?* In a culture so often marked by cynicism, consumerism, and control, can we, like Peter, profess Christ not only in word but in woundedness? To follow Christ today in Zimbabwe is not a romantic ideal—it is a costly choice. It means choosing dignity when systems humiliate. It means choosing dialogue over division, peacemaking over performance, hope over habit.

The lives of Saint Sixtus II and his companions, martyred under the persecution of Emperor Valerian, remind us that the Church is built not only on confession, but on costly witness. They spoke not to rocks but to rulers, and their blood watered the ground from which the Church grew. Saint Cajetan, the gentle reformer, called priests to live simply, to serve the poor, to trust in Providence, not patronage. His life is a quiet rebuke to clericalism and a call to interior renewal. Both saints are reminders that true leadership is not found in striking out, but in kneeling down.

And in this spirit of humble fidelity, we mark a special occasion today as we offer our Monthly Mass for the needs of the Church and of the Society, on the 211th anniversary of the restoration of the Society of Jesus in 1814. It is a time to remember that the Society itself was once struck down, yet restored by grace. A time to pray not only for our own renewal, but for the courage to be living water in the wildernesses of today.

Ignatius taught us to imagine ourselves inside the Gospel scenes. So let us enter today's texts. Stand beside Moses: do you feel the pressure of the people, the weight of leadership, the heat of the sun and the heat of anger? Can you imagine God's voice—gentle, precise—asking you simply to speak? Or walk with Peter: do you feel the joy of insight, the pride of blessing, and then the sting of rebuke? What do you learn when Christ calls you both 'rock' and 'Satan' in the span of a breath?

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The examen invites us to ask: When today did I lead with trust, and when did I reach for control? When did I listen, and when did I harden my heart?

So I leave you, dear friends, with these questions for the road ahead:

- Where in my life am I striking the rock, when God is asking me to speak to it in trust?
- What confession of faith do I need to make more courageously in the face of pain, doubt, or injustice?
- How can I soften my heart this week to truly listen—to God, to others, to the cry of the poor?

May we, like Peter, be rocks that hold fast to Christ. And may we, like Moses, learn—even in failure—that God's mercy still flows.

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In preparing this homily, I consulted various resources to deepen my understanding of today's readings, including using Magisterium AI for assistance. The final content remains the responsibility of the author.