

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2008

In this period of electoral campaign, we see how our modern democratic system functions. It is the people who elect their representatives and leaders, and give them authority over them. In the ancient times, however, things were not the same as they are today. It was believed that power came from God and was exercised in the name of God. In the same way, the rise and the fall of the kings were seen as directed by the invisible hand of God, as described in today's first reading.

As a matter of fact, the oracle of Isaiah announces the destitution of the superintendent of the king's palace, because of bad management, and his replacement by another. The description of his power shows that he has received it not from himself, but from God who has rejected him. Like the former superintendent, the new manager is just an instrument that God uses for the good of his people. The giving of the keys to the new manager symbolizes the control he has over the king's palace, the authority he has to administer his property, and the power to decide who has to be received or rejected by the king.

It is the same symbol of keys that Jesus uses in the Gospel when putting Peter at the head of the Church. But before we come to this important moment, let us, first, examine the circumstances that led to the choice of Peter as the leader of the Church.

In fact, after having gone around Galilee, in towns and villages, preaching and doing miracles, Jesus' fame spread all over the country and abroad. People were enthusiastic and came to him, looking for healing and consolation. Now Jesus wants to know if all these people have come to know him.

Unfortunately, what people think of him, according to the variety of their opinions, is not what Jesus truly is. To which Peter reacted, on behalf of his colleagues, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God". For Jesus, such a response is a result of God's revelation and not from human endeavor.

What this passage teaches us is that we have to give a personal answer to the question of Jesus: "Who do you say that I am?" It means also that being Christian does consist in knowing some things about Jesus, but it consists in knowing Jesus in a more personal way. That is why, in our faith journey, we cannot be content only with what we have heard about Jesus. Jesus demands of us a personal verdict about him.

Assured by Peter's confession, Jesus can confide to him: "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it". As it appears, the initiative of making Peter a rock comes from God, because it was God who has chosen him to receive enlightenment about Jesus. Not flesh and blood, but the Father is the source of revelation.

The Church lives with a firm promise that the enemy forces will never defeat it. It means also that whatever might be the turmoil the Church can go through, it will survive, because it is God's and human work. If today the Church continues to

prosper, it is with God's assistance. In that sense, God is the foundation of his Church and Peter is made a rock on which it is founded.

Peter is given also the keys to the kingdom of heaven. It means he is given special power in order to keep the Church in unity, truth and right teaching. The symbolism of keys means he is given a responsibility. It is only to trusted friends that we leave the keys of our house so that they take care of it when we are on vacation. We give the key of our car to a son only when we are sure that he can drive well. In this regard, the privilege of the keys means that Peter is made the steward of the household of God, opening the door to all to enter into the kingdom. The duty of binding and loosing makes him a decision-maker about all matters concerning the life of the Church.

The reading of the Acts of the Apostles shows that Peter has played that role as the spokesman for the apostolic group and their acknowledged leader. By revealing to Peter the true identity of Jesus, God has allowed him to be chosen by Jesus as the leader of the Church. This makes Peter the ruler of the Church whose decisions in faith, on earth, are confirmed by God, in heaven. That role of Peter is continued today by the popes.

That implies that in the Church, the Bishop of Rome is the one responsible for maintaining the unity of the faith professed by Peter. Moreover, given the divisions in Christian churches today, the universal community of Christians clearly needs to grasp the importance of the figure of Peter as the one who summarizes in himself the unity of the whole Church. We believe that being in communion with the pope, representative of Peter, is as important as it was in the early Church. In a world divided and in opposition to one another over religious ideas, we need that visible unity of the Church today more than ever.

But, how does it come that God can choose human beings and let them represent him in such way that the Church is functioning? This is part of God's plan of salvation of which St Paul says that it is inscrutable, incomprehensible and unsearchable. When we meditate on God's wisdom, riches, judgments and knowledge, we have to declare our incapacity to comprehend the way he leads us in life. Every step of our life is a mystery. God's plans are impenetrable and unforeseeable, and this applies not only to the history of peoples, but also in the life of every person. Let us pray today for our Pope Benedict that the Lord blesses him to lead the Church in the way of truth, faith and unity. May also those who have a particular responsibility inside the Church work together for the glory of God and the unity of his Church! May God bless you all!

Isaiah 22, 19-23; Romans 11, 33-36; Matthew 16, 13-20



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