

## **Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2011**

The readings of this Sunday talk about human authority, how it relates to God and how it affects our relationship with God and with one another. In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah describes a model of authority that is quite different from the democratic form of government we have today. As a matter of fact, the text is about an administrator of the house of a king who is rejected because of his bad management and replaced by another.

The way the whole affair is described gives us an idea of how, at that time, the power was organized and how the authority was conceived of as coming from God and exercised on behalf of God. That is the reason why the administrator was seen, not only as a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, but also as a delegate to whom was given the key to the house of David so that when he opened, no one could shut down, and when he shut down, no one could open.

This vision of authority is prominent in today's Gospel as Jesus delegates Peter to lead the Church on his behalf. First of all, the Gospel says that, as Jesus went into the region of Caesarea, he asked his disciples a question relative to what people think of him.

As we would expect, the opinions of people were various as they falsely identified Jesus with John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or with one of the prophets. This episode shows us how mistaken people can be by thinking that they know someone only for having met him and from the outside.

Because the people failed to recognize Jesus in his true identity, he turned to his disciples so that they say what they think he is. It was at that time that Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit and filled with God's grace, could confess that he was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. For Jesus, such a response was the result of God's revelation and not of human discovery.

The mistake of the people over the identity of Jesus is a warning to us so that we come to say from our own experience who Jesus is for us. Of course, we can say a lot of things about Jesus from what we have learned from our parents, the Catechism, the religious education or our priests. It remains, however, a duty that we come to say in our own terms and with our own words who Jesus is for us. We have to get out of anonymous faith, in which we repeat things we have learned, to an assertive faith, based on personal experience of life. That is why, in our faith journey, we cannot be content only with what we have heard about Jesus. We have to give a personal answer to the question of his identity.

After Peter had confessed Jesus' identity, Jesus made him a triple promise. The first promise is relative to the identity of Peter who becomes the rock on which the Church will be built. The second promise is relative to the assurance that Satan and his forces will never destroy the Church. And the third is relative to Peter's authority of leading the Church.

Each one of these promises has a consequence for the understanding of the leadership in the Church and its role in the world. First, the initial and original foundation of the Church is Jesus. In a derivative way, Peter is the foundation of the Church, too, in the sense that he is the first person to discover who Jesus was. It is, then, on his confession

of faith that the Church is built and continues to exist. But, as he was speaking on behalf of his colleague-apostles, it means also that the promise made to him was for the consolidation of the Church he was representing. Therefore, anyone confessing the same faith becomes a member of this big community, which is the Church.

Second, the Church will never fail in its role of saving people and leading them to eternal life, because it lives with a firm promise that the forces contrary to it will never defeat it. That is why, whatever might happen to the Church in human history, it will always survive, because it is not a human work.

Third, by giving to Peter the keys and the power to bind and to loose, Jesus has established him in the position of leadership and authority over the Church. He has given him the charge of leading, feeding and defending the flock. The duty of binding and loosing makes Peter a decision-maker about the matters of the life of the Church.

The symbolism of the key means also that he is given responsibility to keep the Church in unity, in truth and the right teaching. As experience has taught us, it is only to trusted friends that we leave the keys of our house when we go on vacation. We give the key of our car to someone only when we are sure that he/she can drive well.

Sometimes when somebody has abused our trust, we simply say: “give me the keys back“. Therefore, we have to understand that by giving the keys to Peter, Jesus has entrusted him with the care of the Church. That role of responsibility, leadership and care over the Church is continued today by the pope who maintains the faith and the unity of the Church in Christ Jesus.

The leadership in the Church is part of God’s plan that made Peter the first among his pairs to preside to the unity of the first community. About that plan of God, St Paul says that it is inscrutable and unsearchable. When we meditate on God’s wisdom, riches, judgments and knowledge, we have to confess that the way he leads us is completely mysterious, because we do not know how to account for it. . That God’s plan is mysterious for us does not apply only to the history of peoples, but also to our own life.

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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