

**This Sunday's Readings – the 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time** – Today's readings are as follows:

- Isaiah 22:19-23
- Psalm 138:1-2, 2-3, 6, 8
- Romans 11:33-36
- Matthew 16:13-20

The common thread in today's reading is the "key", which is the symbol of authority in Israel.

The first reading from Isaiah tells the story of Shebna and Eliakim. Shebna could be considered the "prime minister" of the palace during the reign of King Hezekiah (715 BC – 687 BC). The robe, the sash, and the key were the symbols of power. Shebna held a very powerful position. He alone, at royal events, permitted or denied access to the royal presence and there was no appeal. His word was final. So what did Shebna do to incur God's wrath. He went along with the king in making alliances with foreign nations. Today that doesn't seem like a big deal. Countries make alliances all the time. However, back in Isaiah's time this went against the will of God. Why? These foreign alliances would lead to the dilution of the Jewish religion, encourage the introduction and worship of false gods, and violated the covenant made by God on Mt. Sinai. Because of that, God sent Isaiah to strip Shebna of his power and install Eliakim, son of Hilkiyah, in his place. Note that Isaiah does not just give Eliakim the key but he gives him the "key of the House of David", which represented the covenant God made with David that would last forever. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2002 syndicated column adds this comment on this first reading – "Matthew's ancestors in the faith presumed Yahweh gave certain individuals the charism of leadership. Isaiah emphasizes this charismatic dimension of authority in the first reading (Is 22: 15, 19-23). Only Yahweh can "thrust" Shebna from office and "summon" Eliakim to replace him. Yahweh alone clothes, girds, gives, places and fixes. The Chosen People have just one role in this process: to recognize the gift God bestowed on this special individual".

The Gospel reading from Matthew recounts Peter's confession about Jesus. This story is also recounted in the Gospels of Mark and Luke. Matthew, who used Mark's Gospel as one of his sources, enhances Mark's account by expanding the role of Peter and the disciples. Matthew casts Peter and the disciples in a much more favorable light than do the other evangelists. Finally, Jesus and His disciples are alone "in the region of Caesarea Philippi". This was located approximately 20 miles north of the Sea of Galilee and ruled by Philip, a son of Herod. Jesus first asks the disciples "Who do people say that the Son of Man is" and they replied, John the Baptist, Elijah, or "Jeremiah or one of the prophets". Then Jesus asks them "who do you say that I am". Peter immediately responds by saying "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". Fr. Francis X. Cleary, SJ in his *Sunday Scripture Readings* comments on Jesus response – "He first pronounced a beatitude upon Peter, the only disciple in the Gospels to receive a personal blessing". Jesus then changes Simon's name to Peter, which in both Latin and Greek means rock. Peter is to be the foundation of the Church. Just as Isaiah bestowed the "key of the House of David" on Eliakim, so Jesus bestowed the "keys to the kingdom of heaven" on Peter. Fr. Cleary further comments – "Jesus proclaimed Peter's investiture

with power as vice regent - administrative deputy rather than ruler in his own right, since Christ remains head of his Church". Only Matthew recounts this commissioning of Peter. Fr. Roger Karban in his 1999 syndicated column comments on this commissioning of Peter – "Since personal computers added new terms to our language, I often refer to Matthew 16:18 as the "virus that ate the Bible." Once Pope Stephen I (254-257) used this text against Cyprian of Carthage to defend Roman primacy, Christians began to hear something in these words which Matthew never intended. We Catholics especially, ignoring both the evangelist's historical situation and modern tools of biblical exegesis, find it as difficult to separate this verse from the modern papacy as to separate Rossini's "William Tell Overture" from the Lone Ranger. Considering that these words to Peter are found only in Matthew, presuming Mark and Luke's communities never read Matthew's Gospel, and taking for granted that Matthew's readers believed Jesus' Second Coming would take place in their lifetime, Scripture scholars find it impossible to interpret Sunday's Gospel (Mt 16:13-20) as a "foundation text" for the Roman papacy. But having heard these words used in a papal context all our lives, we've turned them into a statement which, for all practical purpose, makes Jesus' more significant and demanding Gospel teachings fade into obscurity". Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment on the commissioning of Peter – "But there is division among exegetes along confessional lines over the question of the continuation of Peter's function in the Church. Protestant exegesis sees the fulfillment of the saying about the Rock in the once-and-for-all role that played such a large part in the foundation of the Church after the first Easter and resurrection appearances (Cullmann), and sees the power of the keys and of binding and loosing as continued in the Church as a whole, though capable of being entrusted to particular officers by the community (Marxsen). Anglican exegetes tend to agree with the Orthodox that the power of the keys and of binding and loosing is shared by the whole episcopate, though many of them would be prepared to allow the Bishop of Rome a special place in this collegial office. Catholic scholars naturally maintain that the Petrine office is vested in the papacy. Nonetheless, it is significant that on all sides there is growing Christian awareness that one aspect of the Petrine office—witness to the resurrection—belongs to the events of the Christian beginnings and is therefore inalienable. At the same time, its other aspects—keys, binding and loosing—continue in the Church. This continuity is a sign of the faithfulness of God".

Now let us look at the cultural ramifications of today's Gospel reading. John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* explains – "Today's familiar story takes on a very different orientation when placed respectfully in its Mediterranean cultural context.

#### DYADIC PERSONALITY

Americans are recognized as the most individualistic people who ever lived on the face of this planet. Each one strives to be distinct. In the United States, everyone has a personal social security number and many other distinctive and singular identities. Mediterranean people are exactly the opposite. Experts describe them as dyadic personalities. The word *dyad* means "pair." Such people are other oriented to such an extent that they have no sense of their individuality but depend rather on the opinions of others to help them know

who they are. Jesus' question, therefore, is not a "theology quiz" for his disciples. It reflects a normal, Mediterranean curiosity by Jesus, a dyadic personality, about what other people think. Like everyone else in this culture, Jesus needs such feedback because he does not know who he is, and he is trying to learn this from significant others in his life.

#### STEREOTYPING

In Jesus' case, the question is particularly interesting because the normal stereotyping of that culture was not working. Jesus' enemies feel satisfied in knowing him as "Jesus of Nazareth." To know a person's home village is to know everything about that person. All people in Nazareth were presumed to be alike. Nathanael's rhetorical question, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46) simply echoes the commonly held, stereotypical image of that village's inhabitants: worthless or no good. Another stereotypical identification of Jesus is "the stone worker's or wood worker's son" (Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3). The ancient wisdom observed, "like father, like son." To know a family was to know everything about every member of that family. "Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?' And they took offense at Jesus" (Matt 13:55-57). True to Mediterranean form, Jesus' disciples tell him what others are saying about him, and how others are perceiving him: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, another of the prophets. All of these are honorable if mistaken perceptions. But Jesus presses for Simon's opinion, and he says, "the Messiah, the son of the living God."

#### JESUS' IDENTITY

Jesus now has a rather large assortment of opinions to ponder. In gratitude to Simon for this information, Jesus bestows on him a nickname, Rocky or Peter. New names were regularly given at significant moments in a group's life, especially to the more prominent members. In addition, Jesus promises that Peter will become like him, a broker who can provide access to God the patron. This is the significance of giving him the "keys of the kingdom." Keys open doors, which is another way to describe a broker's specialty. Over and beyond that, Peter is given a distinctive power to declare authoritative judgments ("binding and loosing"), something which appears to have been given to all the disciples in Matthew 18:18. If American believers read Jesus' question here from the intense psychological perspective that dominates modern American convictions about self-knowledge and knowledge of others, they will assume Jesus knows who he is and is testing his friends to see if they know. If they use the Mediterranean scenario painted above, they will have to assume Jesus does not know and looks to significant others in order to find out. How will you read the passage?"

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