

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Matt 16:18

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church

and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.

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Gospel

Matt 16:13-20; L121A

Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi and he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

Simon Peter said in reply, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus said to him in reply, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah.

For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father.

And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.

I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Then he strictly ordered his disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

Reflecting on the Gospel

The man came to the Scripture class seeking not only answers but ammunition. His Protestant friends were telling him that Peter was not the first pope. They had Scripture passages to back up their claims. He was sure there was something in the Bible he could use to counteract their arguments. Now the man was asking the instructor for three other Scripture passages he could use that would trump theirs! He was a bit disappointed when the instructor said that's not the way Catholics read Scripture—how he had wanted the equivalent of three aces to play during the next go-around with his Protestant interlocutors!

The story in today's gospel reading from Matthew is a favorite in Catholic-Protestant dialogue or even debates on the role of Peter and the development of the papacy. But the papacy is a long way from the setting of this particular story. Instead, if we read it on its terms, we see that Simon Bar-jonah confesses Jesus as the Christ. He recognizes Jesus for who he is, and Jesus responds by saying this insight was given to him by the heavenly Father. Jesus then names him "Peter," a Greek term meaning "Rock" (though in Aramaic the term is *Kephas*). Prior to this, no person in recorded history had been named "Rock." It's as though Jesus named someone "Window." For us today, who are so familiar with the name "Peter," it sounds standard. But in antiquity, this nickname would have



sounded odd. And for that reason, most scholars believe the name "Peter" goes back to the historical Jesus.

Jesus then says that on this "rock" (whether "rock" in this instance refers to the person of Simon Bar-jonah or his confession of Jesus as Christ is debated) he will build his "church." The term "church" appears in the gospels only in Matthew, and only here and in Matthew 18:17. Historically, churches developed later, so it seems anachronistic for Matthew (or any evangelist) to use the term during the historical ministry of Jesus. It's partially for that reason that the phrase is thought to be a Matthean addition. Even so, Matthew is informing, or reminding, his audience that Peter was a spokesperson for the group, confessed Jesus as Christ, but even this was not due to his insight but from a gift of the Father.

As Catholics, we read Scripture holistically, not cherry-picking verses from here and there, and then applying them in a context divorced from their own. A Catholic approach to Scripture seeks to understand the context in which the book, letter, or verse was written; the intent of the author, as much as possible; and how it corresponds to other Scripture. If we are looking for Scripture verses to use in theological debate with other Christians, we are playing the wrong game.

Living the Paschal Mystery

There is a saying about the Bible, "Familiarity with Scripture is familiarity with Christ." Though Catholics have not had a long history of being familiar with Scripture, there are more and more Bible studies available today online and in parishes, from university level to adult faith formation. Commentaries abound and even the New American Bible is available for free with its footnotes on the USCCB website. Since Vatican II, Catholics have been encouraged to become familiar with Scripture, "the soul of theology" (according to Vatican II itself).

Jesus himself knew Scripture and often cited it. We would do well to do the same. When we learn about the Bible, read footnotes, examine commentaries, and pray with the text, we likely put to death ignorance and instead raise to life knowledge and understanding. To live the paschal mystery is to become familiar with Scripture, not so we can cite passages in theological debates, but so that the wisdom of sacred writ washes over us as waves on a beach. Over time, the waves shape the beach as the Scriptures shape us. Let us live the paschal mystery by embracing familiarity with Scripture, for in so doing, we will become familiar with Christ himself.

Focusing the Gospel

Key words and phrases: “But who do you say that I am?”

To the point: In today’s gospel Jesus asks his disciples to report on the rumors and gossip of the crowd that follows him. He wants to know what they are saying about his identity. While the crowds posit that Jesus might be Elijah or John the Baptist or one of the prophets come back to life, they haven’t made the startling conclusion that Peter has come to: that this man is in fact the anointed one they have been waiting for, the Messiah, “the Son of the living God.” This question of faith remains one that is asked of each disciple today. We have met Jesus in the word of God and in the sacraments of the church. We have heard him proclaimed to us by catechists, evangelists, and preachers. Still, Jesus wants to know, “Who do *you* say that I am?”

Connecting the Gospel

to the first reading: In the first reading the person of Eliakim, who will be given the “key of the house of David,” seems to be foreshadowing the role Peter will play in establishing the church. Just as God promises to “fix [Eliakim] like a peg in a sure spot,” Peter is named “Rock.” Throughout the history of salvation, God calls on humans to be his collaborators. Eliakim is called to take over authority from Shebna, who it seems had abused his station as master of the palace. Unfortunately, Eliakim will also prove an unfit leader, for only a few verses later in Isaiah we read that “the peg fixed in a firm place shall give way, break off and fall” (Isa 22:25; NABRE). From the gospels we know that Peter will also have his moments of failure.

to experience: Throughout the history of the church there have been times when our leaders have failed us. Despite this, Jesus’ promise remains: the church he founded shall stand firm and “the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.” In the end, our faith is in Jesus, our true leader and Lord.

Connecting the Responsorial Psalm

to the readings: Today’s psalm refrain speaks to the one in whom our hope lies: “Lord, your love is eternal; do not forsake the work of your hands.” Despite the many times the people of Israel turn away from God in the Old Testament, God continues to call them back into relationship with him. This is true with the disciples and the early church in the New Testament as well. In the verses immediately following today’s gospel (which will be proclaimed next Sunday), Peter protests Jesus’ revelation that he will be killed and then raised, which leads to the harsh rebuke, “Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me.”

to psalmist preparation: In your own life of faith, when have you stumbled and fallen? In these moments have you perceived God at your side with his eternal love, ready to redeem and restore?

PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING

God says of his servant Eliakim, “I will fix him like a peg in a sure spot.” Which spiritual leaders do you look to for their constancy and steady guidance?

The psalmist sings, “[W]hen I called, you answered me.” When have you had an experience of being answered by the Lord?

St. Paul writes to the Romans, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom / and knowledge of God!” How do you continue to grow in your faith intellectually?

In today’s gospel Peter answers Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” by proclaiming, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” How do you announce who you believe Jesus to be through your words and actions?