

THE EMMAUS SERIES

21st Sunday, Year A

Isaiah 22: 19-2

Romans 11: 33-36

Matthew 16: 13-20

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

We are all familiar with today's gospel. It tells us something fundamental about our life as Catholics. This text portrays Peter as the one authorised by the Saviour to lead his disciples in professing their faith in him. In this age, when God calls believers to work for Christian unity, it is important that we understand it well. When we compare Matthew's account of Peter's confession with that of Mark (Mk 8: 27-33), we see that the two evangelists present Peter in very different ways. In Mark's account, to the questions of Jesus, Peter responds, 'You are the messiah'. Then, when Jesus begins to explain that his role will be very different from that of the messiah of popular expectations – 'The Son of Man is destined to suffer and be put to death' – Peter can not accept what Jesus is saying; and he is sharply rebuked by Jesus, 'Get behind me Satan! You are not thinking as God thinks'. When Matthew is writing his gospel, long after this incident, Peter has long been recognised and venerated as the one who was appointed by Jesus, as the leader of the chosen disciples who were to carry on his mission. In order to celebrate the role given to Peter by the Saviour - a role that he has carried out with great faith and courage – Matthew combines two incidents that took place at different times. He uses Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi as an introduction to what is his main point – the commission that was given to Peter by the Lord, so fundamental for the life of the first Christian community. The gospels make it clear that Peter received such a commission. This commission may well have been referred to by Jesus in different contexts, in view of its basic importance in the carrying on of the mission of Jesus. The change of name recalled by Matthew in this text is so remarkable (Jesus used the Aramaic word for 'rock', kephas, never before used as a name, translated as Petros in Greek) that it obviously had far-reaching significance. Luke refers to the commission of Peter as being made in the highly charged atmosphere of the Last Supper: 'I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail, and once you have recovered, you in your turn must strengthen your brethren' (Lk 22:31). In John's gospel, the risen Lord's three questions to Peter on the shore of the lake – reminding us of Peter's three denials – lead on to his great commission, 'Feed my lambs, feed my sheep'. This whole tradition is filled with reminders of Peter's frailty – a great lesson for the whole Church, faithful and pastors.

In its totality, Matthew's text is a magnificent summary of the self-understanding of the Church of the first generation, and of Peter's leadership role in that Church. Matthew alone of the evangelists used the term 'church' (in this and a later text). This term, that Paul used so frequently - echoing the Old Testament term for the community of faith of old Israel - refers to the New Israel inaugurated by Jesus. The 'gates' of the cities of antiquity were the embodiment of their strength. The Church founded on the ministry of Peter, the 'rock', will triumph over the dark forces of the kingdom of death; and, under Peter's leadership, open the way to the final Kingdom announced and inaugurated by the Saviour. The words of Jesus make clear the practical implications of the authority given to Peter. 'Binding and loosing' referred to the authority of the teachers of old Israel, to legislate and determine policy, and the exclude from the community. If this pastoral authority is shared with the other apostles (cf. Mt 18:18), it is only under the leadership of Peter that they can effectively carry out this pastoral responsibility.

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