

21<sup>st</sup> Sunday (A)

27<sup>th</sup> August 2023

'You are Peter, and on this Rock I will build My Church'

Is 22: *I place the key of the house of David on his shoulder*

Ps 137: *Your love O Lord is eternal, discard not the work of Your hands.*

Rom 11: *how impossible to penetrate God's motives ...*

Mt 16:13–20: *You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church.*

Both St Mark and St Matthew have this episode, this occasion at remote Caesarea Philippi, as the very centrepiece of their Gospels: Mk8/Mt16. It serves for each of them as the turning point, the crux, on which their Gospel narrative hinges: prior to that, the apostles are 'coming to know;' after that, they are coming to know *what it entails*. And 'it' is the admission, the confession, the belief: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" Without this realisation, of course, Our Lord's mission would have failed!

But it certainly took the apostles *time* to appreciate Who Jesus was. The Gospels admit it; it's why this event is at the mid-point of the Gospel: Jesus only revealed Himself to them gradually. He didn't come down on the earth and from the first moment say to the people: "hello, I'm the Messiah, get your act together." In fact, at first, even to the demons who felt His divine presence, he urged

that He not be made known. The reason is clear: that His message was far too rich and significant to be absorbed in a sound-bite, in one sitting, or at a press conference. *How rich are the depths of God — how deep His wisdom and knowledge ...* The message of the Son of God on earth was, first, His *life*: so the apostles first lived with Him and heard and saw Him, so that they could come to know Him. It wasn't a simple handout, or a download ... They needed time to get to know Him: just as any of needs time to get to know the depths of a friend, or of someone we are thinking of marrying. They grew to experience the depths of His love, not just for them but for all, and in doing so gradually came to recognize Who this must be. And it is Simon Peter, as we heard in the Gospel, who finally is willing to put this feeling into words: '*You are the Christ,*' he said, '*the Son of the living God.*' Eventually, then, these months and years of Jesus's company have sown the seeds of conviction: that He can only be the Messiah long-hoped-for.

It is for any of us a lifetime's work to get to know

Christ: to allow Him gradually to shear off the layers of our disbelief and reluctance; to reach the point where we can stand before Him in total honesty and with true devotion and say to Him: *to me, also, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.* As in any relationship, it takes time. It takes time to be sure. Sometimes, if one has been hurt in love, one is slow to open up again ... But, offered true love, one can have the courage to speak the true desires of the heart, to have courage to make that response at last, to be loving in return, and to open up one's heart to the joys of living in love. This is what St Peter is doing: he is putting his life on the line: he is uttering something dangerous and new, yet exciting and liberating: that this Jesus — this seeming man — is truly God. To say this was truly blasphemous, unless it were wonderfully true. It is what we must do! We must make our faith a truly adult experience — that's to say, an expression of adult love and commitment. A friend of mine said to me once: no amount of teaching and talking about the faith will get anywhere, if those listening are not *already in love with Jesus.* Only if

you are deeply in love with God made know to us in Christ, will the teaching make sense. If you are in love with Him, then the teaching will ring true: loving Him you will come to know Him; knowing Him, you will love Him even more.

I think it's worth going back to the Gospel narrative, and seeing how Jesus responds to the profession of faith. When His apostles, voiced by Peter, express this faith in Him that they have come to, Our Lord's reaction is so ecstatic, so buoyant. See how positive, immediate, are the words of Jesus: "*Blessed are you, Simon ... You are 'Peter' and on this 'Rock' I will build My Church.*" Not, "OK, that's good; a few more months of teaching, some revision classes, a few exams, then we'll see if you can graduate ..."! Our Lord's reaction to Peter serves to show how crucial for each of us is this statement of faith. St Peter may have been the first to express it, and that faith is the 'Rock' on which the Church is founded. But each and every one of *us* must also make that statement of faith: we can't get away with fudging the issue, half-saying it, or

bypassing it. We have to say it, mean it, believe it and live it: our personal faith is the ‘rock’ that means that we are part of that great Rock that is the Church. “*You, Jesus, are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*” It anchors it, it grounds us, it means that our lives are held firm, and not subject to the tossing waves of the world and the times we live in. The world can be disorienting, dispiriting, even depressing — which is why more than ever as Christians we have to repeat that faith which holds us firm. “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and for ever.*” Nothing in this world can prise us away from the blessed destiny that Our Lord has for us, if we remain true to Him, anchored to that Rock of St Peter’s profession: “*Jesus, my loving Lord, You are truly the Son of the living God!*”

Now, this naturally also leads us to consider the role of St Peter himself, given by Jesus the keys of the Kingdom, and all that which flows from it — the primacy of Peter, and subsequently, the papacy. All of this is crucial to our reading of this passage as Catholics. It is undeniable that Our Lord’s words are directed at Peter in a

special way, because the new name, “Peter,” given to Simon is of course the very word, “rock.” In the mind of Christ, St Peter’s special role as ‘prince of the apostles’ is foundational; it is fully and divinely intended by Him. It accords with so much other evidence of the Gospels and the *Acts of the Apostles*, that Peter is considered the spokesman and leader: so many times He is the one who speaks up, as here at Caesarea Philippi; and at the end, by the Sea of Galilee, it is Peter who is singled out by the risen Jesus for a key role in the mission; “Feed My sheep.”

How do we interpret this primacy of Peter? Well, for a start, we see in the *Acts of the Apostles* that he exercises his leadership in collaboration with the other brethren, whilst still maintaining a distinct role. A high point in this is the Council of Jerusalem (c. 49AD), recounted in Acts 15, when the apostles meet with St Paul, Barnabas, and others to discuss important matters with regard to evangelizing the Gentiles and the extent to which they should keep the precepts of the Jewish Law. Here Peter takes a key place, but it is clearly the Council itself

which has the highest authority. This sets the pattern for the Church, wherein the Ecumenical Council — that is, the bishops of the world gathered in Council together with the Pope himself (or at least with his permission and usually with his legate) — has the highest authority to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit and to teach. Councils of the Church happen rarely: after that first one in 49AD in Jerusalem, the next didn't happen until 325AD, at the height of the Arian crisis, then subsequently in 381AD, 431AD, 451AD ... The most recent councils were that of Trent (mid 16<sup>th</sup> c.) and then the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Councils (1870 & 1962–65). It is these Councils, esp. at moments of great crisis, that have steered the Church through difficult times, and taught with clarity for the faithful the true doctrine of the Lord.

But it is also Catholic teaching that the Pope can teach, definitively and authoritatively, alone. But let's be clear what this *infallibility* amounts to. The Pope's infallibility is an occasional exercise of the infallibility of Christ's Church, a gift of the Spirit, when she teaches

solemnly on a key matter of faith or morals. The Pope exercises this charism only rarely: examples would include the definition of Mary's immaculate conception (1854, Pius IX); her assumption into heaven ([1950, Pius XII](#)); and the solemn statements made by Pope John Paul II in [Veritatis Splendor](#) (1993) regarding the immorality of abortion and euthanasia. On these occasions, when the Pope speaks *ex cathedra*, he does so with clarity and only on matters of faith or morals; it is a clearly defined exercise of his teaching office, for the good of the Church.

Maybe I can end with referring you to some clear words from the Vatican II document on the Church, [Lumen Gentium](#), para. 25 (see over / ...) in which these matters are clearly set out, and help us to understand the great gift of the Pope to us the Church, his crucial role in anchoring us and guiding us in our life of faith, and our absolute need to cling to him, along with the whole Church, providing the stability and the unity for which Christ prayed.

This is from *Lumen Gentium* 25:

Although the individual bishops do not enjoy the prerogative of infallibility, they nevertheless proclaim Christ's doctrine infallibly whenever, even though dispersed through the world, but still maintaining the bond of communion among themselves and with the successor of Peter, and authentically teaching matters of faith and morals, they are in agreement on one position as definitively to be held. This is even more clearly verified when, gathered together in an ecumenical council, they are teachers and judges of faith and morals for the universal Church, whose definitions must be adhered to with the submission of faith.

And this infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed His Church to be endowed in defining doctrine of faith and morals, extends as far as the deposit of Revelation extends, which must be religiously guarded and faithfully expounded. And this is the infallibility which the Roman Pontiff, the head of the college of bishops, enjoys in virtue of his office, when, as the supreme shepherd and teacher of all the faithful, who confirms his brethren in their faith, by a definitive act he proclaims a doctrine of faith or morals. And therefore his definitions, of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church, are justly styled irreformable, since they are pronounced with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, promised to him in blessed Peter, and therefore they

need no approval of others, nor do they allow an appeal to any other judgment. For then the Roman Pontiff is not pronouncing judgment as a private person, but as the supreme teacher of the universal Church, in whom the charism of infallibility of the Church itself is individually present, he is expounding or defending a doctrine of Catholic faith. The infallibility promised to the Church resides also in the body of Bishops, when that body exercises the supreme magisterium with the successor of Peter. To these definitions the assent of the Church can never be wanting, on account of the activity of that same Holy Spirit, by which the whole flock of Christ is preserved and progresses in unity of faith.