

21st Sunday A

Introduction

It is a joy for me to visit St. Bernadette's and to express my thanks to Deacon Fred Passauer, the pastoral staff and lay leadership for your service to this parish community. Allow me also offer my thanks to all you, the parish family of St. Bernadette, gathered in thankful prayer, as we reflect on the living Word of God, the Scriptures just proclaimed. Taking my cue from those readings, let me offer some reflections on the foundation of our lives and the Church in Christ Jesus, and do so by focusing on two images: the rock and the keys.

The Rock

In Scripture God is often referred to as "the rock". What this means is that God is utterly reliable and enduring foundation of our lives. For example, in Psalm 62 we pray: "My help comes from God, he alone is my rock" (Ps. 62:3). God is our rock because His Word is completely trustworthy. Now, in one way or another, almost every passage of the New Testament proclaims Christ to be the Eternal Word of the Father. Because he assumed our humanity & became the Word made flesh, he is our Savior. For he revealed in and through our humanity that divine love which is the only sure footing for our lives. As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "... and the Rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:4).

Today's Scripture readings tell how God, in his mysterious love for us, sought to share the utter reliability of his truth and love with us through the ages. In the first reading from the prophet Isaiah, an unreliable palace official was replaced by a trustworthy man named Eliakim. God did not make Eliakim a rock but he did promise to make him "a peg in a sure spot" - a sort of anchor for the House of David.

In today's Gospel we see how Christ gave Peter, the leader of the apostles, a share in his own rock-like, reliability, his own trustworthiness as the Word made flesh... so that the Church, in spite of human frailty, would share in his trustworthiness. After sampling public opinion, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" - Peter stepped forward and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God". None of this was Peter's doing - it was God the Father who revealed this to Peter. *This* is why Jesus declared Peter to be the rock, the trustworthy foundation of his

Church. Our Church is not built upon merely upon human talent, goodwill, or opinion, but rather upon Peter's confession of faith in Christ, the Son of the living God, the same faith we profess each Sunday when we recite the Creed.

In our own day we think of how Peter's successors proclaim the Person of Christ. At the beginning of his pontificate in 1979, St. John Paul II wrote: "Our spirit is set in one direction, the only direction for our intellect, will, & heart is— towards Christ our Redeemer, towards Christ, the Redeemer of man" (RH, 7). Or consider the beautiful reflection on Jesus of Nazareth that Pope Benedict gave us, the culmination of years of profound scholarship and deep prayer. And let us think of how simply and beautifully Pope Francis proclaims Jesus. He wants us and everyone to know that: "Jesus Christ loves you, he gave his life to save you, and now he is at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen, and free you" (EG, 164).

Every ministry & initiative in the Church must be rooted in Peter's confession of Christ, in Peter, that rock upon whom Christ founded his Church. So too our own personal lives and our families must have the same solid foundation lest we be swept away in houses built on the sands of opinion and self-centeredness.

The Keys

Along with the image of the rock, today's readings speak also of the keys. Let's think of it this way: Entrusting your keys to someone else means giving that person a share in your own responsibility and authority. You know this if you've given the keys of your car to a teenage son or daughter! We give the keys to our homes or places of work only to those we trust. In the first reading, Eliakim is entrusted with key of the House of David; he was a trusted servant of the king and of the people. Clearly Eliakim had considerable authority in the House of David: "When he opens, no one shall shut; when he shuts no one shall open." In effect, he controlled access to the palace and thus to the king himself.

In New Testament, in the Book of Revelation, proclaims Jesus to be 'the Father's faithful witness' "who has the key of David"; it says: "[he] opens and no one can close, [he] closes and no one can open" (Rev. 3:7). The key which Jesus possesses opens and shuts no earthly palace, rather it is the key to the Kingdom of Heaven and to the netherworld. Jesus, "the judge of the living and the dead" possesses the key to

eternal life.

After Peter confesses Christ as “Son of the living God”, Jesus entrusts Peter with the keys of the kingdom of heaven, so that his Church would share in his power over sin and death. Echoing Isaiah, Jesus declares to Peter and to his successors, “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” The power of the keys reaches from this world to the next. Jesus put immense trust in Peter, despite his frailty, just as he continues to put his trust in Peter’s successors and in bishops and priests who share in Christ’s authority over sin, especially in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Such authority is granted not for one’s own purposes but rather to unlock the treasury of God’s divine mercy. Such authority is given to unlock our hearts, yours and mine, so that we will be open to all that Lord wishes to do for us. Indeed, the goal and the art of all ministry has much to do with unlocking and opening human hearts to the workings of God amid the ups and downs of daily life, including its triumphs and tragedies.

A Faith That Is Solid; Hearts That Are Open

The Lord made Peter the rock and gave him the keys of the Kingdom so as to fashion a people whose hearts are indeed open to the truth and love of Christ, a people who welcome Christ into their hearts and homes and claim Him as the rock upon which they build their lives, so as to fashion for himself a people who not only confess the Name of Christ but who also bear witness to Christ the Rock in our fragmented world and who serve as a means of reconciliation for the wounds of human existence. We have only to think of the persecuted religious minorities in Iraq, men, women, and children, whose sufferings are almost unimaginable; we have only to think of the tragic unrest in Ferguson and the nightly tragedies that unfold in so many other places, including our own city of Baltimore.

The great mission which Christ entrusted to all his disciples is to go forth and to bear witness to Christ the Rock in our broken world and to unlock the hearts of those who have not yet welcomed him, especially those who are searching or those whose faith has faltered, or to open for those who are poor and vulnerable the treasury of Christ’s love. Each of us, according to our vocations, share in this mission to

proclaim "... the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!" To him be all praise and glory, now and forever more. Amen!