

Homily For the Feast of The Chair of St. Peter - Year II

St Peter's 8:30am/7:00pm Masses - Tuesday, February 22, 2022

1 Peter 5:1-4 "When the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades."

Psalm 23:1-6 "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord."

Matthew 16:13-19 "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

A Rock, A Shepherd, and a Chair

Introduction

This is a feast day for a chair, a piece of furniture. But of course we are not talking about where Pope Francis sits to have his morning coffee. The Chair of Peter is a symbol of teaching authority. In Jesus' day, every synagogue had a place that the rabbi would sit, a position of respect from which to teach his disciples, representing the seat of the lawgiver, Moses. Today's feast and Gospel passage is most important for clarifying how this 'seat of Moses' became the divine authority of the New Moses, who confers that same authority onto the 'Chair of Peter', the one who is called the rock.

Surprise, surprise, though. This feast really celebrates Jesus more than Peter. It is his authority which is being passed from one to the other. It is his Church which will be built. It is he who will be the builder. It is he who is the teacher 'par excellence'. It is for the purpose of being his body that the Church is built. It is Christ who continues to provide the keys of the kingdom to the Church. And, it is he who will be the safeguard, the guardian against the gates of hell itself. This is what we celebrate today.

Matthew

There is a giant rock at Caesarea Philippi, about 100 feet high and 200 feet wide. As rocks go, it would not be too impressive to us who live in the shadow of the mountains we call 'Rockies'. However, there it is quite impressive because it stands out by itself. It rises out of the ground like a giant symbol. That's why locals went there to offer sacrifices to gods. It was populated mainly by Gentiles, and

was home to a cultic shrine dedicated to the deity Pan. Caesar Augustus had give the city to Herod the Great, whose son Philip, the tetrarch, later renovated and renamed it Philip's Caesarea.

This passage describes a masterpiece setting for this greatest teaching moment. The crucifixion was imposed on Jesus by Roman and Jewish authorities. The Father raised him from the dead on the 3rd day. But this moment , of the many moments that Jesus controls and directs, this is THE greatest moment that Jesus entirely controls.

From the Sea of Galilee, the disciples walked with Jesus more than thirty kilometers north to Caesarea Philippi, to that very place. They must have wondered why. Can you imagine being one of them? If you ever get to go there, you can stand in their place. Jesus has his back to the rock so you are looking up at him and the stone right behind him.

In that place, at a city dedicated to the undisputed earthly ruler, where gods are worshipped and sacrificed to, Jesus looks at those who follow him there and poses the question: "Who ... do people say that the Son of Man is? They answer by reporting on the opinion polls from the six o'clock news. The polls are divided. There is no consensus as to the identity of Jesus. He is John the Baptist come back to life. He is one of the many prophets. He is a new kind of prophet. He is from God. He preaches repentance, performs mighty works, and boldly proclaims the will of God for Israel. It doesn't say this in the text but we know that one of the opinions is that he is from the devil. But, like many opinion polls, they are all wrong, wrong, wrong.

Jesus now puts the question to his disciples: But who do you say that I am? This is the first time that Jesus puts them on the spot in this way. The response comes from Simon Peter, who declares: You are the Messiah AND the Son of the living God. Remarkably, Jesus accepts these designations without hesitation or qualification. In return, Jesus issues his own declaration that Peter is to be the foundation of a new kind of temple, a new way to worship God. This way will be known as the Church.

Jesus then announces that Simon Peter is to have a unique role in God's plan. He is to be the rock upon which Jesus will build this new temple. Here, Jesus mentions His Church for the first time in the Gospel. The Lord made Simon alone, whom he named Peter, the rock of his Church. He gave Peter the keys of his Church.

In David's kingdom, the possessor of the keys was the chief steward. He had the authority of the king when the king was away. The new David gives that same kingdom authority to Peter. And, just like that Davidic authority was passed from one to another, so the authority given to Peter was to be passed from him to another and another, in a line we call the popes. Thanks to the blessing of Jesus on Peter, neither death, nor the devil, nor his deceiving spirits shall ever prevail against the Church.

1 Peter

This same Peter writes a letter to the leaders, the elders, of all the churches. There, he explains what kind of authority they have. It is not the kind which lords over people. It is the authority of a shepherd, a steward, who cares for what his not his, with his whole life, in service to the people. These leaders are to recognize that this leadership is that of Christ himself, who gives himself, who is called Lord of all, primarily because he is the servant of all. That is why the pope is called the *Servus Servorum Dei*, the servant of the servants of God.

In Psalm 23, God is the shepherd who is with his people during their darkest times. Once resurrected, Jesus confirmed this mission to Simon Peter. Do you love me? Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you. Feed my sheep. Walk with them through their dark days. This is how you will continue to carry out your mission to guard the Church against the gates of Hades.

Call To Action

I conclude with the words of St. Thomas More: "We are with the pope because, being with him, one is with God." Let us pray that our leaders will be shepherds like the original rock, Peter, to whom Christ himself gave the keys.

Key Scripture Passages

Entrance Antiphon: *I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail and, once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.*

Collect: *You have set us fast on the rock of the Apostle Peter's confession of faith*

1 Peter: *Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge. Do not lord it over them, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.*

Psalm 23: *The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.*

Matthew: *When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And the disciples said, "Some say John the Baptist but others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Jesus said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*