

Homily notes: (at Mass will expand and vary):

23rd August 2020 - 21st Sunday in OT Year A 2020

LISTEN to recording at 5pm Vigil Mass via our homilies page

‘Our name is Peter.’ The journalists blinked: they thought he was Paul. It did cause some confusion over 50 years ago when Pope St Paul VI speaking before the World Council of Churches opened by saying ‘Our name is Peter.’

We are a church of both Peter and Paul: Peter the rock, Paul the builder. Both feature in the readings today. Paul asks in our 2nd reading, from his letter to the Romans: “Who could ever know the mind of the Lord?” It is a rhetorical question, and Paul does not expect the readers to answer.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus says to the disciples; “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” This however is not a rhetorical question – Jesus does expect an answer. When the disciples reply, it is clear they do not really grasp what Jesus is getting at, so he makes the question more direct; “But you, who do you say I am?”

In a way this question is very similar to the one Paul asks. Simon is the only one who answers; “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus congratulates him on his reply, and tells Simon that what he understands about Jesus has been revealed to him by the Father. Simon has at last become conscious of what is happening – he knows the mind of the Lord! That knowledge is like a rock that cannot be overthrown, not even by devilish powers of the underworld, and all faith and authority are based upon it.

Jesus also tells Simon who he is: he gives him a new name: Peter, Petros in Greek, from which we get petrified, in Aramaic Kephias, Rock. I gather a common word in Greek, but there is no evidence that Peter was a proper name before Jesus renamed Simon.

It was GK Chesterton who wrote “When Christ, at a symbolic moment was establishing his great society, the church, he chose for its cornerstone neither the brilliant Paul nor the mystic John, but a shuffler, a snob, a coward- **in a word a man**. And upon this rock he has built his church.

And the gates of hell have not prevailed against it. All the empires and the kingdoms have failed, because of this inherent and continual weakness; that they were founded by strong men and upon strong men. But this one thing, the historic Catholic Church was founded on a weak man and for that reason it is indestructible.

The epithets that Chesterton applies with reference to Peter may seem to us irreverent or scarcely conciliatory, however, Chesterton heightens the tone to ensure that we reflect on a reality that in the eyes of unbelievers or, in general, anyone who aspires to understand the Church with merely human parameters, turns out in fact to be scandalous; namely that the Church was founded on weak men, or to be more precise, that the church was founded taking their weakness into account. This makes the church distinct from all human institutions that exist in the world, founded without taking this weakness into account; and without taking it into account they are inexorably condemned to extinction.

Christ wanted his church to be founded on the weakness of human nature and he wanted her to be presided over by a weak man, just like any one of us. Both Peter and Paul were deeply flawed, deeply human, and both experienced the grace of conversion. They both bear eloquent witness to the power of the gospel to transform us. Peter, emotional, impulsive and cowardly, truly became the rock upon which the church was built – the rock of martyrdom and devotion to Christ. Paul, once zealous, blinded and violent, following his conversion on the road to Damascus became the greatest evangelist of the early church.

Peter is the first one to see what it is all about and who Jesus really is. He is the *primus inter pares*, the first among equals, and he remains so even after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. The other disciples are aware of this, which is why in Acts (8:14) they send out Peter, and call him to give account of himself when necessary (Acts 11; 1-18).

It is worth pointing out that the foundation "rock" about which Jesus talks is not Peter's personality, but his insight and his faith, an insight not revealed by any human being but by God. The rock Jesus speaks of earlier in Matthew, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount "Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a sensible man who built his house on rock. Rain came down, floods rose, gales blew and

hurled themselves against that house, and it did not fall; it was founded on rock.”

No one can contest that Peter has a very special place in the story of the Gospel. However all of us are supposed to be as he is: centred on the rock that is our faith in Jesus Christ, and joint key-holders to God’s kingdom here on earth.

This is our catholic faith; the faith that takes weakness into account, the faith that acts through grace, using as means, our human nature. It is this loving embrace that makes the church indestructible and why the gates of hell have not prevailed against her.

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