

21ST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, A
WHO IS JESUS TO YOU

“You, who do you say I am? ... You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Matt. 16: 15, 16)

One of the weaknesses of man, when he rises to heights of wealth, power and influence is that he forgets that he is a creature, and begins to act like a god assuming and arrogating to himself powers that are beyond him. The theme that runs through the Readings of today’s celebration is the power of God as the source of all human authority.

In the First Reading (Is. 22: 19-23), the Word of God was addressed to Shebna, who was the secretary or comptroller and master of the palace during the reign of Hezekiah as King of Judah (2 Kings 18: 18; Is. 22: 15). While in office, Shebna abused his power: he was selfish, irresponsible, acted with arrogance and impunity. For these, the Lord deposed him from his office, stripped him of his powers, taking from him his robe, his sash, and the keys and handed them over to Eliakim. Like most people in authority today, Shebna failed to recognise his position as a gift of God for service; he had allowed himself to be fuelled up and intoxicated by power. He simply got carried away. Thus, the Lord, Who “brings down the lowly from their thrones”, deposed and humiliated him. Let this remind us that our positions, great and small, are gifts from the Lord. He, Who gave, has the power to take it away from us. Every position is given for service, not for oppression, suppression, and abuse of others nor the feeding of our selfish ego. What positions do we occupy? What powers do we have? How are we using them? Take note of the words of the Psalmist: “The Lord is on high yet He looks on the lowly and the haughty He knows from afar” (Ps. 137)

St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans (11: 33-36) which served as our Second Reading praises the infinite wisdom and unfathomable knowledge of God through which everything existed, continues to exist and will always exist. This is the supreme acknowledgment of God’s power that everything exists through Him; that we are what we are because of His grace. The awareness of God’s power calls for human humility and submission before the Almighty, Who gives and takes according to His plans and purposes. We should always remember that we are the works of His Hands.

The theme of God’s power can be gleaned from the Gospel (Matt. 16: 13-20) as Jesus entrusts the “keys of the kingdom” to Peter as a prize for his faith-manifestation and proclamation: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Matt. 16: 16). The context of this very significant incident is as important as the

event itself. Jesus knew that His time of earth was drawing to a close. He needed more time to be with His disciples for there was much to tell them within the limited time. So He withdrew to the region of Caesarea Philippi, a non-Jewish region under Philip the Tetrarch, where He would have little or no disturbance. There was a need for Jesus to know what people thought of Him and therefore, the question: "Who do people say I am?" The response related Him with John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. These linkages were significant too. John the Baptist was such a great and distinguished figure; whose memory was still very fresh in the minds of the people. Remember Herod Antipas even thought so too: Elijah was not only the greatest of the prophets, but he was said to be the forerunner of the Messiah: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes" (*Mal 4:5*). In the Second Book of Esdra (2:18), the promise of God is: "For thy help, I will send my servants Isaiah and Jeremiah" (see also 2 Macc. 2: 1-12). The reference to "one of the prophets" infers that the people had recognised the unique ministry of Jesus and associated Him with "one of the prophets." These identifications though did not in any way match the divine identity of Jesus signified the high pedestal the people placed Jesus. But these were not sufficient. For there are no human categories that are adequate to identify or compare with God – God is God, far above all human understanding.

There was still something more to be said. Thus, Jesus turned to His disciples: "You, who do you say I am?" With the emphasis on You, this question speaks deeper than we can imagine. You who have been with Me all this while; who have heard all My teachings; who have seen the many miracles I have performed, You, who you say I am? The question points to the fact that, first and foremost, it does not matter what others think or say about Jesus, right or wrong, but what matters most is what you say. It refers to that personal experience, that personal discovery of Jesus by an individual for him/herself.

Then Peter spoke up: "You are Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matt. 16: 16). Peter found on his lips words that were greater than both his intellect and himself. They were words divinely revealed by the Father of His Son. Jesus acknowledged that when He said: "Simon, son of Jonah, you are a happy man! Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but My Father in heaven." Our faith journey is a journey of divine guidance and grace. We need the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to know and love God as we ought. True knowledge of God must be divinely revealed and not completely the fruit of human intellect. Try to answer the question: "You, who do you say Jesus is?"

As a reward for his cooperation with divine inspiration, Jesus continued: So I can now say to you: You are Peter and on this rock, I will build My Church” (Matt. 16: 18). Jesus found in Peter the solid rock to build His Church. Over the centuries, there have been controversies on the correct interpretation of the use of the word Church or Community by Jesus in this context. While we may not delve into such controversies, it suffices to say that we should pay attention to the singular use of the word. It was the intention of the Son of the Living God to build a single Church on a single foundation for a community of people confessing the one faith of Peter. The faith is the rock and Peter is the still the frail man, who would attempt a second escape from death in Rome until he met Jesus going into Rome to die a second time because he, Peter would not die for Him. By faith, we all become “living stones” of the Lord’s House. We do not have to be perfect to be part of this building. All we need is to surrender to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Who continues to teach, guide, and direct us all and the Church. Needless for us to rely on our abilities as Jesus said: “Cut from Me, you can do nothing” (Jn. 15: 5).

Jesus went on to say: “And the gates of the underworld shall not hold out against it.” This refers to the indestructibility of the Church. The basis for this is the foundation, which is spiritual, and therefore sustained by the power of God that is the cause of and stronger than all that is. We need to pray for that faith “as strong and immovable as a rock.”

“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” Like Eliakim in the First reading, Peter is given the keys, not of the kingdom of David but the new kingdom of the people of God; not to open and close but to bind and loose to reconcile the people with their God.

“Whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven.” The power of the keys entrusted to Peter came with the authority to forgive men’s sins and reconcile them with God (Jn. 20: 21-23). Bishops and priests who share in the succession of Peter, have the privilege to act in nomine *et personae Christi* (in the name and person of Christ) in the Sacrament of Reconciliation to forgive sins.

My dear friends, let us open our hearts to accept personally Jesus as the Son of the Living God, Who created us in love and sustains us with that same love with favours beyond our imaginations; with hearts filled with humility and gratitude, let us surrender to Him and gratefully use our privileged positions at the service of others.