

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 22:19-23

Romans 11:33-36

Matthew 16:13-20

Caesarea Philippi is a Roman town built on an ancient site of pagan worship. It is partially restored today, and you can see remnants of the former imperial city, as well as the more ancient sacred place of pagan worship. Today's gospel reading brings to mind the sheer wall of stone against which the pagan temple stood. At the foot of the rock face is a cave out of which mysteriously flows a stream. (It comes underground from Mt. Hermon to the north). The ancients believed that this was the entrance to the underworld of darkness and evil. It was here that Jesus chose to call Peter to a special role in the church.

With his back to this huge rock cliff, Jesus looked at Peter and said, “**You** are Peter, the Rock, on which I will build my church, and the Gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.”

These words of the Lord are seen by Catholics as the biblical origin of the papacy. The Apostle Peter spent many years ministering in the great city of Antioch in Syria, but eventually he went to Rome, the imperial capital, where he met a martyr's death. Since that time, Christians have associated the Roman Church with Peter, and Rome's bishops are called Peter's successors. His mission became theirs.

What was the mission of Peter? What role did he play in the church's first generation? What does he represent for us today? Has his mission continued in the work of his successors?

The New Testament portrays Peter as a man with many gifts performing many ministries. He was hardly a perfect person. We all remember that he denied knowing Jesus after the Lord's arrest, something he bitterly regretted and did everything to atone for. Nevertheless, at the height of his ministry, we see Peter arguing with the apostle Paul over table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul accused Peter of hypocrisy, but I'll bet there was fault on both sides.

Peter responded to Jesus' command to “tend my sheep,” as recorded in the Gospel of John. He was a fearless preacher, a compassionate healer, and an inspiring teacher, if the vision attributed to him of Christ's disciples as a chosen race and a royal priesthood was really his. And Peter was willing to change his mind and learn new things. We see this in the Book of Acts, as he came to understand that the gospel was not just for his fellow Jews.

Peter's frequent appearances in Scripture indicate that he was a very important figure in the early church and was revered for his close association with Jesus during the Lord's public ministry.

Many if not most of Peter's successors have understood themselves to be unifiers of the church, defenders of the faith, and authoritative representatives of Jesus. Their record has been mixed. Even Benedict XVI once said that there were popes that the Holy Spirit would never have selected—if it had been totally up to the Holy Spirit. And the papal office itself remains controversial. Almost half of all Christians do not recognize the pope as their leader, even if they do acknowledge Peter's role in the Bible.

If you tend toward cynicism, as I do, it is easy to focus on all of the sins Christians have committed since that day when Jesus told Peter, "You are the rock." We need to remember that in our time Christianity claims the largest number of followers of any religion, that new people come to the faith every day, and that many Christians have actually tried to live as Jesus would want us to live. Not to mention the fact that a pope like John Paul II had numerous admirers beyond the boundaries of the Catholic Church. This is all good news.

But if we, as Christians, are still a long way from full communion with each other, as we continue to argue about things like who will be saved; how many sacraments there are; whether unity means uniformity; and the big questions of our time like war and peace and poverty, perhaps it is because we focus too much on ourselves and our institutions, and not enough on Jesus.

Focusing on Jesus. This, I believe, was Peter's most important role, his most important contribution to the faith. At Caesarea Philippi, Peter was pointing to Jesus, and Peter was saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Think about this. To most observers, Jesus would have looked like an ordinary Galilean man, just a regular person, even if they were impressed with his teaching and healing. But when Peter looked at Jesus, he saw the anointed one, the promised leader of Israel. He saw the precious oil on Jesus' head, and he saw in him the image of God. Basically, Peter was experiencing the Transfiguration before they went up the mountain. And if Jesus truly is Son of God and Christ, then we, his followers, should listen very carefully to what he has to say.

The successors of Peter, therefore, could do far worse than to point us to the Lord and urge us to listen to him. But we don't have to wait for our leaders to take this initiative. Where do we see the Christ in our lives? How is he calling us? And what is he asking us to do?

