

**ECHOING GOD'S WORD  
IN THE  
CATHOLIC COMMUNITY  
AUGUST 27, 2023  
TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

**SCRIPTURES:**

<b>Isaiah 22:15, 19-23</b>	God warns those who are unfaithful leaders.
<b>Romans 11:33-36</b>	Paul breaks out in praise and worship.
<b>Matthew 16:13-20</b>	Peter confesses the faith of the Church

**SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:**

**Matthew:**

The Church only gives us half of the story in stopping at verse 20 of this passage from Matthew. The whole story is that, after having exalted Peter with a new title and the promise of new responsibilities, Jesus also rebukes Peter when the latter would not hear of suffering in the role of the Messiah and in his own role as the agent of that Messiah. Verses 21-23 make the story complete: The Messiah must die in order to fulfill his mission. Peter will not hear it. So, Jesus says to him, "Get in line behind me, my agent; do not be a rock over which people will stumble."

A *satan* in the Bible is an agent of God, an enforcer, an adversary, who brings people around to do God's will. (See the role of the *satan* in the Book of Job.) I would prefer to translate this passage the way I think Matthew meant it. He has Jesus say to Peter: "Get in line behind me; Go where I am going: to the cross! That way, you will truly be living up to your role as my *satan*. You will be the rock of faithfulness and not the rock over which the disciples will stumble."

Now, let us go back to the portion of this chapter that is given us in the lectionary.

The real message of this Gospel has nothing to do with establishing the pope as almighty on earth. Peter, representing all community leaders in Matthew's assembly, must be a sure guide, a firm and staunch believer in Jesus, and not a scandal or an occasion of sin for the rest of the faithful. His faith will be the foundation upon which rests the faith of the community. His willingness to die with Jesus must be the example given to all who believe in Jesus.

Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ. Jesus confesses Peter to be the rock. Matthew makes it quite clear by this parallel structure that he wants the community to understand that believing in Christ has priority over and is an essential prerequisite to leadership in the faith community. This Gospel is about the Church and its leaders. Believing that Jesus is the Anointed One of God comes first and serves as the foundation upon which will rest the beliefs and the commitments of the rest of the community.

Notice that Jesus first tells them to keep this title (Messiah) secret until its fuller meaning has been revealed in the Passion and resurrection.

Jesus has been calling himself "Son of Man" (Matthew 8:20). It is a title that derives from the Book of Daniel, where a human being is designated as representative of all that is human. "Son of" in Semitic languages means "the ultimate of that kind." *Son of Man* would seem to mean *He who represents the whole human race before God*.

Peter calls Jesus *Son of God*. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." This title

is not used by Jesus when referring to himself. But it is the title given him by those who acknowledge his origins and his role. The demons call him Son of God (Matthew 8:29). The disciples, too (Matthew 14:33). Finally, the Roman soldiers at the foot of the cross (Matthew 27:54). The Jewish authorities and the crowd use the title only when they want to mock him (Matthew 27:40 and 43).

### **Isaiah:**

God wants the people of Jerusalem to know that their leaders need to be faithful to the terms of the Covenant. Those human leaders represent the Lord; they are to reflect the righteousness of God to the people they govern in God's name. There is a code of behavior to be observed as a sign of faithfulness to the Lord. They cannot merely say that they are faithful; they must show it by the quality of their actions. From Chapters 13 to 21, the prophet had spoken of how neighboring nations would be punished for their hostility and cruelty. He then turns to Jerusalem and calls its people to righteous lives, also in Chapter 22. As God's special people, they cannot be exempt from what God requires of others.

### **Romans:**

Paul borrows from the prophet Isaiah, from the Book of Job, and from Stoic writings to acclaim the mighty Lord of the universe who has worked such wonders in the world, among which is the awesome achievement of bringing together Jew and Gentile for the ultimate praise of the Lord's glory. There can be no greater work than that; only God could ever have achieved what is truly beyond any human power: the reconciliation of the nations with the people of Israel.

## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. What nicknames have you been called in your lifetime? Have these names been a blessing to you or a curse? Discuss the power that name calling has on people? What kinds of names do we give to our pets? Our sailboats or pickup trucks? (Oh, Yes! In Maine we give names to pickups!)
2. What does it mean to you to call Jesus of Nazareth the *Anointed One of God, the Christ*? Do you have a sense that Jesus responds and gives you a name that designates your function or your responsibility in his community? What title is the most appropriate for you as a disciple of Jesus Christ?
3. Is it clear to you and to your community that we cannot call Jesus Messiah or Christ without also being willing to follow him to the cross? Do you understand that Jesus was redefining *Messiah* when he added that the Messiah must suffer and die? No follower of Jesus can be a faithful follower without going all the way with him!

## **SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION**

Make a list of the titles that you attribute to Jesus of Nazareth. Compare this with the names or the nicknames that you give to yourself or to others disciples of the Lord.

## PRAYER

**Who can measure the wealth and the wisdom and the knowledge of God?**

**Who can understand his decisions or explain what he does?**

**Has anyone known the thoughts of the Lord  
or given him advice?**

**Has anyone loaned something to the Lord  
that must be repaid?**

**All things come from the Lord. All things were made because of him  
and will return to him.**

**Praise the Lord forever. Amen**

(Romans 11:33-36)

## CATHOLIC PASTORAL PRACTICES

People expect a lot from the local Catholic parish. Those who do not think positively of the Church will always expect the very worst in everything that we do. There are still some around who believe the Catholic Church is the Whore of Babylon spoken of in the Book of Revelation. The pope is the Anti-Christ, etc. Other people expect the parish to solve all their problems; to provide for all their needs; to defend their cause in a hostile environment; to win favor for them with an unfriendly God. The Church is supposed to be so mighty and powerful. Most parishes fall short of all these expectations. We are not the source of all evil; we are not the only source of good.

The Lord Jesus looked to his disciples for support in his life, his identity, and his mission. Peter speaks for the others; he speaks for all of us. "You are the Christ, the Messiah of God." So, then, Jesus has a title for Peter: "You are Rock upon which I will build my Church. Death itself will have no power over it. God himself will allow in heaven whatever you allow on earth." Thus, Jesus gives to Peter (to the leaders of his community) the same mission that he had received from his Father. What a privilege! What a burden!

At the parish level, our responsibility consists in doing the works of Jesus: proclaiming, celebrating, guiding. We have to be willing to go to the cross with Jesus in order to bring new life to those whom we serve.

Formerly as a parish leader, I saw all kinds of expectations of me and of my community on the part of those who are with us and those who are not. The parish at times is expected to be lily white in all virtues, when the fact of the matter is that we, too, are sinners trying to become saints. People sometimes want the Church to save them from eternal damnation, when all we can do is minister to them so they can claim the salvation that Jesus has already obtained for them.

A servant Church will be made up of servant parishes. We are servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our ministries are conducted in all humility before the Lord. There is no room for arrogance or for personal privileges in the assembly of faith. Clergy privileges or the arrogant exercise of power have no place among those who are servants in a servant community.

At times, one gets the impression that some would like to be ordained to the priesthood in order to exercise that power which they think priests have.

I am convinced that, once the leadership of the Church and leaders in a parish have been

stripped of all signs of power and of control according to worldly standards, God will give us numerous vocations to the priesthood.

**© 2017 Rev. Clement D. Thibodeau. All rights reserved.**