

Ordinary Time 21A 2017

Upon this Rock

Who is Jesus? We don't know when it happened; but we know it happened. At a certain moment in Jesus' ministry, people began to ask about his identity. Who is this man from Galilee who speaks with such authority, heals the sick, and casts out demons? Many people thought of Jesus as a prophet. Others confused him with John the Baptist. Still others thought they were seeing a new appearance of the prophet Jeremiah or Elijah in Jesus. And so, after Jesus asked his disciples what others were saying about him, he asked what *they* thought about him. After all, it is one thing to repeat what others are saying, it is another to take a stand and give your opinion.

Peter's Response to Jesus. It was at this moment that Peter made the glorious confession we just heard. He knew what others were saying. He had heard the rumors. But unlike other people he had been following Jesus for a long time, and he had come to a much deeper understanding of Jesus. Yes, Jesus was an authoritative teacher and a powerful miracle worker. Yes, he was a prophet. But there was something about Jesus that made him different from the prophets who came before him. Peter was slowly, ever so slowly, beginning to realize that Jesus was the fulfillment of all God's promises. He was the long-awaited Messiah. His relationship with God was so intimate that he must be God's Son.

Jesus' Response to Peter. Jesus understood that Peter did not realize the full meaning of his own confession; for it was God who revealed this mystery to Peter. And so, as Jesus looked to the time when he would no longer be with his disciples, he named Peter the rock, the foundation of the community of believers that would become church. Peter would be the rock on which Jesus would build his church, a rock of faith for the faith of others.

A Special Gospel for Catholics. This gospel has special meaning for us Catholics; for it reminds and assures us that while Christ is the foundation of the church, Peter is the first stone in that foundation, a stone that is meant to support and strengthen the faith of the church. And so we believe there is an intimate connection between the ministry of Peter and the ministry of the Pope.

Bad Examples. To be sure, the papacy has not always been the model of Peter's faith Jesus intended it to be. At times in the history of the church, especially in the late Middle Ages and the period of the renaissance, many popes did not fulfill their ministry of love and service to the church. But Christ promised Peter that not even the gates of hell would be able to destroy his church. Not even the papacy at its worst would be able to destroy the church.

Good Examples. But the picture has not always been so bleak. There have always been outstanding popes such as Leo the Great and Gregory the Great, and in recent times we have seen a remarkable line of popes who have followed in the footsteps of Christ and Peter, calling us to faith, hope and love. I think of John the XXIII who called the Second Vatican Council, of John Paul II who brought the papacy to the world, of Benedict the XVI who reminded us of the beauty of our faith, of Pope Francis who is challenging us to follow the gospel in all its simplicity: a poor church for the poor.

Do Not Be Ashamed. There are many people who are confused about Catholicism, others who are ashamed of it; and still others who have abandoned it. But I am not ashamed of my ancestral faith! For me Catholicism with its sacraments and liturgy is the richest expression of Christianity. Catholicism is about Jesus, who is the Messiah, the Son of God, the one God sent to redeem us. Catholicism finds its unity in the successor of Peter who strengthens us in our faith. I am not ashamed of this faith. Neither should you be!