



Twenty-first Sunday Ordinary Time 2005.

Isaiah 22: 19-23 Romans 11: 33-36 Matthew 16: 13-20

The Gospel for today is linked closely to the gospel for next Sunday. We need to see today's passage as a prelude to next Sunday's reading.

There are three important motifs in this story. The first is the location, at Caesarea Philippi which lies to the north of the Sea of Galilee. This city was built on the slopes of Mt. Hermon, near one of the sources of the Jordan River. It was a place of divine revelation. Ancient writings record such instances as Enoch having visions in this place. Here in this place of revelation Peter identifies Jesus as Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

Jesus poses the question, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"
Peter replies, "You are Messiah, Son of the Living God."

The title Son of Man is a very difficult one to understand. It is used almost exclusively by Jesus of himself. One interpretation is that Jesus, who taught in parables, used this title as a kind of parable. This means it is a name that requires engagement by the listener. It would also provide a reason why it was not a common title for Jesus in the early church. The exchange then seems to suggest that Jesus uses an ambiguous title for himself while Peter's response is such that it could only be a revelatory gift of God.

The second motif of importance is the symbol of rock-foundation. There are many examples of puns on names in the Scriptures. They fit with the Jewish love of humour. Issac, which means "joke", as in the joke's on us- conceiving a child in old age. It appears that Peter had the nick-name "Rocky". This could have come from his appearance or maybe his temperament. Jesus uses this as a kind of "in" joke. In Isaiah, 51:1-2, we read, "look to the rock from which you were hewn". In Ps.118:22 we read, "the stone which the builder rejected has become the cornerstone." Christ is the capstone but Peter is an important part of the foundation.

The third motif, keys of the kingdom, has its reference point in Isaiah 22:22. It is this passage which is in our first reading. A little bit of background will situate it. The chapter describes the fate of Jerusalem and puts the blame partially on Shebna, master of the palace. This faithless servant was busy looking after number one. He had even built himself an elaborate tomb monument on a mountain. The rock he had used would mark his disgrace. The role of Shebna and his garments of office would be given to a more worthy candidate. God says, "I will place the key of the House of David on his shoulder; when he opens, no one shall shut, when he shuts, no one shall open. I will fix him like a peg in a sure spot to be a place of honour for his family." Is.22:22. Peter is guardian of the house of God.

Chapter 11 of the letter to the Romans concludes with a hymn to Divine Wisdom. This beautiful hymn points us to an understanding of today's readings.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgements,
and how inscrutable his ways!
For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counsellor?
Or who has given a gift to him in the hope of being repaid?
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be glory for ever. Amen.

In Jesus and through Jesus, ordinary, weak, sinful people, united with one another find the strength and courage to live to their full potential, thus giving glory to God.

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