

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

GOSPEL

Jerusalem Bible © 1966 by Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd and Doubleday & Company Inc.

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi he put this question to his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say he is John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' 'But you,' he said 'who do you say I am?' Then Simon Peter spoke up, 'You are the Christ,' he said, 'the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, '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. So I now say to you: You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven: whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven.' Then he gave the disciples strict orders not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

(Matthew 16:13–20)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Caesarea Philippi is north of the region of Galilee. It was given to Herod the Great by Augustus Caesar, and Herod built a white stone temple there, dedicating it to his patron. After Herod's death, it passed into the hands of his son, Philip, who built his capital here—hence the name, Caesarea Philippi.
- The great stone temple built by Herod was at the natural spring that is the source of the Jordan River. The temple was dedicated to the Roman god of nature, Pan. The cave of Pan is housed in a high natural edifice of rock, and it was here that Jesus reputedly told Peter that he, too, would be a rock on which the Church is built—not dedicated to a pagan god but to the one true God.

EXPLORING THE WORD

At this point in the gospel, Jesus and his chosen ones have travelled and lived together for some time. He invites them to explore what they understand of his identity. Even in his question, there is an explicit hint of his identity: 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' The people offer a variety of opinions: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But it is Peter who adds to the title 'Son of Man' by recognising Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. This same Peter, whose faith faltered when he was buffeted by the wind and waves (see the gospel for the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time), has now shown that he is open to God and recognises Jesus for who he is. But this is not the end of Peter's story. There are ups and downs in his response, as there are in our own. As long as we remain open to the gift of faith, we are offered forgiveness when we fail to treasure what God has given to us.

- Have you experienced the ups and downs of faith? What sustains you?
- What title would you give to Jesus?
- Are you like the Peter who doubts and falters or the Peter who boldly proclaims his faith?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'Who do you say I am?' If you were to be asked this question by Jesus, how might you respond today?
- In this passage, Jesus speaks of the Church. What are your feelings about the Church at this point in your journey?
- Recall and describe for someone else in the group a time when you were given special authority or responsibility. How did you feel about this special position? How did you carry out the task?
- What are your responsibilities now that you have elected to follow Christ? How will being a disciple of Jesus influence the way you use authority: in your home? in your workplace? in the daily decisions you make? Exercise that responsibility this week.
- Repeat these words often this week:
You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

SHARING THE TRADITION

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

The Pope is the Bishop of Rome, a city traditionally associated with Peter's evangelising mission. This gospel text is the one that is traditionally used as the basis for the Catholic Church's teaching on the primacy of the Pope in guiding and unifying the Church, although he is assisted in this task by all the bishops. There have been 266 popes from Peter to the present pontiff, Francis. The Pope's voice is an especially privileged one in the Church. This does not mean that everything the Pope says or does is without error. What he teaches must be taken with seriousness because of the office he holds. There are only rare occasions when the Pope speaks solemnly and with full authority on any particular matter. At other times he is expressing the teachings of the Church and offering an 'authoritative' guide to the faithful.

- Explain the structure of the Church and how the Pope, bishops, priests and laity function together for the good of the whole.
- Explain the idea of papal infallibility, noting especially the two statements about Mary that have been made infallibly: *the Immaculate Conception*—that Mary was conceived and born without original sin (noting that many people confuse this with the virgin birth of Jesus); and *the Assumption*—that Mary was not subject to normal corruption after death but was taken to heaven, body and soul. Enquire how people feel about and understand papal infallibility.

SYMBOLS AND IMAGES

Keys are a symbol of authority. Jesus says to Peter, 'I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.' Jesus entrusts his authority to Peter, and thus to successive popes and to the Church. This authority must always be used with wisdom and compassion, and with it comes great responsibility. The crossed keys are part of the emblem of the papacy.

LIVING THE WORD

Practical ideas for group leaders to employ in connecting Scripture and daily life, with suggestions for music and environment

- 'It was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven.' Faith is a gift freely given by God, to which humans must respond. Apart from the Sunday liturgy, what opportunities are offered in your parish community to respond in faith and to deepen faith? Could catechumens become involved?
- Display a large rock and a set of keys as the focus for prayer this week. Pray for the Pope in the exercise of his leadership of the Church. Pray for all those who exercise leadership in whatever ministry they undertake. A suitable song may be 'For you are my God' (*As One*

Voice 178). Conclude with the prayer of exorcism in the RCIA at §94E.

NOTES