

August 23, 2020

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 22:19-23

Romans 11:33-36

Matthew 16:13-20

Imagine the scene in today's gospel. Jesus and his disciples walked from Capernaum to Caesarea Philippi, a distance of about 30 miles. I've travelled that road. It's hot, dry, dusty, and rocky; and it's an uphill hike. It's a killer walk in modern hiking boots. I can't imagine doing it in sandals. I estimate it was maybe a three-day walk for Jesus and His disciples.

To make matters worse, they're heading into a place where Jews aren't all that welcome. In fact, it's a place where an observant Jew would never venture. The dialogue between Jesus, His disciples, and Peter indeed takes place in front of the gates of the netherworld. Perhaps that requires some explanation.

The gates of the netherworld, then and now, are located in an outdoor pagan temple dedicated to the god Pan, the ancient Greek god of the wild worshipped by the Greek speaking people in the region of Caesarea Philippi. The "gates" are actually a large entrance to a very deep cave. Pan's worshipers offered sacrifices to him by driving livestock into the cave. If the livestock never came out of the cave it meant that Pan had accepted the sacrifice. But if any livestock wandered back out of the cave, it meant that Pan had rejected the sacrifice and that instilled great fear into the people.

Other distinctive features of Pan's temple were the large numbers of rocks arranged in different designs that held various symbolisms for Pan's followers.

Walking into this temple of Pan must have been a frightening experience for the disciples. In addition to being in physical danger for trespassing, they're in a place considered ritually impure for Jews. What is Jesus doing? Why has He led us here?

So it's in this uncomfortable setting where in the face of worldly, even evil, symbolisms Jesus drops the big question: **"Who do YOU say that I am?"**. Peter doesn't hesitate: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God". So in the midst of all the religiously symbolic rocks, Jesus names Peter THE rock; and in front of the gates of the netherworld, Jesus commissions Peter to be the rock upon which Jesus will build His Church against which the gates of the netherworld they are staring at will be powerless.

Peter must have been shaking in his sandals. He likely would have died of fright if he had any realization whatsoever exactly what Jesus was asking him to do and exactly what authority Jesus was delegating to him.

Of course we know that Peter would eventually grow into the job, a job where Jesus gave him unbridled authority to continue Jesus' earthly ministry after Jesus leaves this earth.

We know from the Acts of the Apostles that Peter handled this powerful authority quite well.

In our lives we are each asked to assume some level of authority. Depending upon our station in life, we may be asked to assume authority over children; over employees; over organizations; over constituents; over physical assets; over finances; even over a municipality or a state or a country. Depending upon the amount of authority one has, a person can be perceived as powerful, or not.

But in Jesus' realm, it's not important how much authority you have or how powerful people may perceive you to be. What's important is how you use whatever authority is entrusted to you.

In the first reading today, through the prophet Isaiah God says to Shebna: "I will thrust you from your office and pull you down from your station". This is a big deal because Shebna was the Master of the Palace for Judah's King Hezekiah. In modern day terms Shebna would be like the chief of staff for a governor or a president. Shebna held a powerful job with much authority. God was deposing him because he had used his office to exalt himself even above the Lord, and in so doing did not serve either his king or the king's people very well.

And so the Lord will not judge us by the extent of our power or authority. He will judge us, however, on how we use whatever authority we may have. Since all earthly authority comes from God, as evidenced by the authority Jesus gives Peter in today's gospel, we are expected to use that authority in service to others. That is discipleship. That is stewardship.

So how can one determine whether authority is being used well in service to others? Well, if the authority is being used to advance one's own agenda like King Hezekiah's Shebna, then it's being misused.

I think the best way to determine whether authority is being well exercised in service to others is to ask this question: Is how you exercise your authority life-giving to others?

Those who exercise life-giving authority empower others, allowing them to reach their potential. Those who exercise life-giving authority prioritize life and quality of life over all else—over profits; over choice; over individual freedoms. Those who exercise life-giving authority put

the common good above their own self-interest and above the rights of individuals. This pandemic has highlighted the difference between leaders who use their authority to give life vs those who use their authority to advance some other agenda.

There are many life-giving role models out there for us to emulate. Today's gospel highlights one of the best who ever lived: Peter. And as Christians, we have the very best role model of all: Jesus.

As we continue our celebration today, let us pray that we always be life-giving to others. Let us also pray that in this election year the Lord grant us the wisdom to not only exercise our precious right to vote, but to use our votes to elect those who have a track record of life-giving leadership.