

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 23, 2020 A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *God of Creation, you have placed certain persons in roles of authority in our world, Church and homes. Give these brothers and sisters wise and understanding hearts that they may guide us well. Breathe your Holy Spirit upon us as we gather to share life and your Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first and third readings speak about the conferral of keys of authority. In the second reading, Paul bows down before the authority of God whose ways are inscrutable and full of wisdom.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the first reading, the psalm and the second reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 22:15, 19-23

The prophet Isaiah is delivering God's judgment to a disgraced public official, Shebna, who supports Israel's military alliance with one pagan nation (Egypt) against another (Assyria). The failed alliance is disastrous for Israel, which the prophet attributes to a failure to trust in the Lord alone. Shebna will therefore be removed from his position of trust and honor and a successor named. The Lord promises, "I will give over to him your authority... I will place the key of the House of David on Eliakim's shoulder" (Is 22:21, 22). The basis for conferring this symbolic key of power is, of course, Eliakim's perceived trust in the Lord God alone.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 138

In this hymn of thanksgiving, the Psalmist, unlike Shebna, places his confidence in God.

SECOND READING: Romans 11:33-36

This is an acclamation of praise to God. Paul's hymn comes at the end of his discussion of Israel's place in God's plan of salvation in light of the Christ-event. Although Paul anguishes over the fact that many Jews have not accepted Christ, he asserts that their slowness to believe has led to the Gentile mission. Ultimately, Jews as well as Gentiles will receive God's mercy. When faced with the unexplainable, unfathomable and unexpected turn of events in human history as it pertains to Jews as well as Gentiles, Paul's only response is awe.

God's riches or fullness, his wisdom and knowledge, are the subject of verses 33. *God's riches* convey the sense of overflowing abundance of a God whose very being, whose love and fidelity, can neither be contained nor limited. As the Scripture attests, *God's ways* of doing things are often not our ways. One can only respond with awe to God's mysterious ways. *God's knowledge and understanding* surpass all human designs. *God's wisdom* is something we receive as a gift from him.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matt. 16:13-20

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 16:13-20

The Gospel opens with Jesus asking the disciples "Who do people say that I am?" They respond that people see him as a prophet. Then Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is. Peter, in a moment of a great insight, speaks up on behalf of the other disciples: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Peter probably says more than he knows.

Then Jesus shifts the focus from himself to Peter. After Peter names the *identity* and *mission* of Jesus, Jesus unfolds the *identity* and *mission* of Peter. Jesus confers a new title on Peter. Going forward, Peter will be the *foundation stone* of a new people (the Church).

This Gospel shows that the primacy of Peter (which each of his successors holds) is not something that was invented by the Church later on. It goes back to the mind and will of Jesus himself.

The failures of popes throughout history do not contradict Jesus' promise that "the gates of hell would not prevail against the Church." Peter himself failed the Lord. In giving authority and primacy to the one who will deny him, Jesus is communicating to us that his Church was not established on human strength, but on his own divine love and faithfulness. The Church's true foundation is Christ himself. The Pope is servant, not his substitute.

The words "binding" and "loosing" refers to the Church's authority to legislate, e.g., to name behaviors that lead to life and to forbid behaviors that lead us away from Christ. In addition the power to bind and loose refers to the Church's authority to excommunicate a member just as Paul did. (See 1Cor 5:5).

Jesus forbids the disciples to speak of this event because it would be misunderstood prior to Pentecost when the Holy Spirit will enlighten the people.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Turn to the person next to you and share what verse or image in the readings caught your attention or drew you in. Was there a verse or aspect of the readings that challenged you?

The facilitator can decide which is more helpful: to share the next questions with the whole group, or to share in smaller groups of three or four.

2. In the second reading, Paul speaks about the 'inscrutable' and 'unsearchable' ways of God. For you, what might be an example of these words?

3. Jesus asks his disciples the question: "Who do you say I am?" How would you answer this question?

4. One could say Peter was the least qualified of Jesus' disciples to head up the Church. He was uneducated, impulsive, a coward when things got tough. So why do you think Jesus chose him?

5. Most of us reading this Gospel have lived through several papacies. Does one stand out for you? If so, why?

6. It has been said: 'God does not call the qualified, but he qualifies those he calls.' Have you seen that work in your life?

7. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: As each of us wields some authority in our homes and communities, spend time thinking about how you use your authority.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, you founded our Church to continue your work on earth. Bless our church family and help me to do my part to make our church family a shining light in our world.*

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: Pray for Church and government leaders. Pray that they will always seek and do what is truthful and just.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Loving God,
lead us to a deeper knowledge and
understanding of your Son Jesus.
We trust that this understanding will lead us
to a deeper commitment on our part to
continue your work here on earth.
Amen.*