

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

First reading:

(Isaiah 22.15, 19-23)

The Master of the Palace

This reading from Isaiah is chosen to pair with the gospel reading about the appointment of Peter, for there Peter is appointed as head of Jesus' own team.

In this first reading, Isaiah predicts that Eliakim will take the place of Shebna as master of the king's palace in Jerusalem, and that God will invest him with authority.

To open and close the doors of the palace was the privilege of the master of the place. To the Hebrew mind such a pair of opposites often signifies everything in between, so that opening and closing the doors mean having control of everything that goes on. No one else may interfere.

Similarly, by the pair of opposites 'binding' and 'loosing', Peter is given total authority over the assembly or community of Jesus that is the Church. Equivalently, as Eliakim is given the key of the palace on his shoulder (or, as we would say, round his neck), so Peter is given the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Peter is sometimes pictured as the doorkeeper of heaven, but 'the Kingdom of Heaven' is far wider: it means 'God's sovereignty', which Jesus came to establish on earth, in which all obey, worship and give glory to God.

Question:

How does this Old Testament reading contribute to our understanding of the gospel?

Second reading:

(Romans 11.33-36)

God's Wisdom and Knowledge

After his long and thorough exposition of the way in which the work of Christ won our salvation, and by his loving obedience wiped away the proud sin of Adam's disobedience, Paul has been agonizing about how the Jews can have failed to recognize this fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham.

Quoting one passage of scripture after another, he finally comes to the conclusion that, in the end, in God's good time a remnant of Israel will be saved. How this will be, he really cannot explain. Throwing up his hands in incomprehension, he can only burst into this wonderful hymn of praise to God's inscrutable Wisdom. We simply cannot understand God's plans and methods.

This concluding passage comes close to the marvellous passage at the end of the Book of Job. Job has rejected the shallow explanations for his sufferings suggested by his friends, when God intervenes to show Job how mighty and wise he is. Job can only admit that God's Wisdom surpasses anything human beings can conceive, and God's might infinitely transcends any human power. So, Paul willingly grants that God must run his own world, and we cannot even attempt to challenge God's reasoning, for everything begins and ends in God.

Question:

Are faith and reason at all compatible?

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Gospel:

(Matthew 16.13-20)

Jesus Claims Peter as Rock

At last Peter recognizes that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. At last he realizes that in Jesus they can see the action of God.

The disciples followed Jesus as soon as he called, but for a long time they were puzzled what to make of him, of his wonderful teaching and his godlike personality. Now comes a shaft of light and understanding.

We too often take some time to appreciate the true worth of someone we know well: a little gesture can sometimes reveal just how generous and thoughtful they are. Peter suddenly grasps that there is God, acting among them, a daunting or even terrifying thought. Jesus replies to Peter's recognition with his own generosity, giving him a new name, 'Rock', for this is what 'Peter' means.

If you name something, you make it your own, take it to yourself. This is just what Jesus does with Simon who becomes his own Peter. That is the importance of the naming of a child at baptism: Jesus takes us to himself and we become his. The early Christians called themselves 'Those over whom the name of Jesus has been called'. We may have been named Mary or John, but the name of Jesus has been called over us and we have become his.

Question:

What are the implications for us of Jesus' promise to Peter?
