

21ST SUNDAY "A" 2008 AUGUST 24, 2008

FR. JOE SOBIERAJSKI, S.J.

ISAIAH 22:19-23 ROMANS 11:33-36

MATTHEW 16:13-20



Below the great Basilica of St. Peter's in Rome is the area known as the Grottos, the place where many of the Popes are buried. In 1939 after the death of Pius XI, a place was being prepared for his burial. The decision was made to lower the floor in the undercroft to make room for the elaborate crypt that was a gift of Pius XI's home Diocese of Milan. As the workmen began their digging they discovered what they thought were just a series of tombs from the original St. Peter's, but they eventually gave way to an entire necropolis covering a vast space rich with funerary monuments and pathways between the crypts and graves, some pagan and some Christian. These were all part of an old Roman cemetery on Vatican hill which Constantine leveled to build the old St. Peter's Basilica in the Fourth Century. Further digging revealed exactly why Constantine chose to build his Basilica where he did. Under the main altar, which stands in the same spot as that of the old St. Peter's, archeologists discovered a small classical shrine with columns that support what seems to be an altar all surmounted by a pediment. The shrine served as a kind of monument for a grave below, and on the wall the shrine has graffiti which said, "Peter is here." What was rediscovered here in what is today called the "Scavi" was evidence that the belief that led Constantine to build his initial basilica, and which has drawn pilgrims to this spot ever since, a small repository holding the bones of St. Peter.

Today the largest Church in the world containing priceless art, and seen as the center of Roman Catholicism honors the man who began his life as a humble fisherman in Galilee. One Simon son of Jonah who through his brother Andrew was introduced to a Rabbi named Jesus and from that moment on his life was changed forever. It was, however, a gradual change, and today's Gospel offers us a pivotal moment in Peter's transformation.

A few weeks ago we saw Peter's faith weaken and then be strengthened by Jesus as Peter walked toward Him on the water. Today, Matthew makes note that Jesus and His Apostles are at Caesarea Philippi, a place where a great temple was built to the Caesar as a god; it was also a place that is said to be the birthplace of the Greek god Pan as well as a center of worship for the Syrian god Baal. It seems that Jesus chose this place, Caesarea

Philippi, with its tradition of pagan worship, as specific background for what was about to take place here.

Here with His closest companions He asks a question, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” but, that question only sets the stage for the really important question, “But who do you say that I am?” Although not indicated by our Gospel, I suspect that there must have been a shocked and even fearful silence with no one wanting to say the wrong thing, before the impetuous Peter replies, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Like the woman last week who called Jesus “Lord” and “Son of David” using Jewish Messianic titles, Peter’s confession of Jesus as Christ does the same since it means “Anointed.” “Son of the Living God,” on the other hand may not have meant exactly what we mean by it today, that is, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. It certainly meant that Jesus has a special, unique, and close relationship with God. Jesus obviously sees significance in Peter’s words, since He says that Peter could only have made this confession with the help of His “Heavenly Father.”

All of this leads to one of the most important moments in Simon son of Jonah’s life, when Jesus changes his name to Peter, and says that upon this Rock He will build His Church. All in all it seems a very good day for Peter, for his faith, and for his role in Christ’s mission and our First Reading from Isaiah seems to reveal the way God works in giving the gift of authority to those He chooses. Just as Yahweh clothes His servant Eliakim with the robe and sash of authority that belonged to Shebna, and gives him the keys of the house of David, so too Jesus gives Peter the Keys to the Kingdom. Next week, however, we will see that Peter still has room to grow if he is to be the Rock that Jesus has called him to be.

Peter’s faith and calling go hand in hand. As he grows in faith and trust in the Lord, he becomes the servant Christ has called him to be. That change does not take place overnight; Peter must struggle with his interior doubts and fears, and he must learn to depend on Jesus as the source of his strength even when Jesus is no longer physically present.

That is the lesson we must all learn—simply to depend on Christ. In our own age we can hear the voices of others as they talk about Jesus. Who do they say that He is today? Broadway has told us that He is a “Superstar”. You’ll see ads on TV and in the newspapers today refer to Him as “sexy Jesus.” Some of the members of the *Jesus Seminar* say that He was an itinerant social critic, a sage and a rebel, while others in the same seminar call Him a shaman and a magician. Others say He was simply a wise man in the mold of Confucius or

Buddha. Today, however, that second question, “Who do you say that I am?” still remains most important.

We give Him many names growing out of both our religious education, and our personal experience. We could look at all the names given to Him in Scripture and ascent to their truth. We could call Him that personal friend who is always at our side and find truth there too. But, it seems to me that no matter what else our education and experience reveals to us about Jesus, we ultimately have to come back to Peter’s confession: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” In those words we recognize Him as our God, and our Savior, and it is from the recognition of that about our Lord that all other titles, all other relationships flow.

We can be sure that when Peter made his confession testifying to Jesus’ identity he did not fully understand his own words. He had not yet experienced the Lord’s Passion, Death, and Resurrection. He had not yet experienced the cowardice of his own denial of his Lord, nor understood the depth of the Lord’s mercy and forgiveness. I’m sure that every day that Peter lived he grew in a depth of understanding of who Jesus as Messiah and Son of God meant in his own life.

What about you? Against the background of who the world tells you Jesus is who is He in your own life? Take the time this week to prayerfully consider the Lord’s question to you, “Who do you say that I am?” Don’t be too quick to answer. First, against the background of Scripture, look at your life and the ways that He has somehow revealed Himself to you in the events and people, the joys and sorrows that have been part of your life. Only then begin to answer as humbly as you can, knowing that neither our minds nor our hearts will ever fully know or appreciate who Jesus Christ is for us until the day that we live both with and in Him forever. Peter may have been the Rock on which Christ built His Church, but first Peter had to be grounded in Rock that was and is Christ. We may not have any great churches built in our honor, but as building blocks of the same church we find our strength just as Peter did, in the love, the mercy and the forgiveness of Christ.