

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)  
(Isaiah 22:15.19-23 / Matthew 16:13-20)  
27.08.2017

Dear brothers and sisters,

“Jesus put this question to his disciples: ‘Who do people say **the Son of Man** is?’ What does ‘the Son of Man’ mean in Jesus’ question? The evangelist Matthew uses the expression ‘the Son of Man’ as a way of talking about Jesus. The Son of Man is Jesus himself. So, Jesus’ question is: “Who do people say **I** am?” The proof of this interpretation is found in the other synoptic gospels relating the same event where we find the words: “Who do people say **I** am?” in Mark (Mk 8:27) or “Who do the crowds say **I** am?” in Luke (Luke 9:18). So, in Matthew’s version of the event, ‘Son of Man’ is a title for Jesus, like ‘Messiah’ for example, and not only a generic term or a personal pronoun as is the case in other parts of the Scriptures.

When Jesus put this question to his disciples: “Who do people say I am?” He was not looking to be reassured about his identity. Jesus knew who He was. His question was to help his disciples reflect upon his identity and to put their reflection into words. This exercise will be a great help to them when they come to fulfil their mission and set out to preach about Jesus and his gospel. We need to be aware that those who listened to Jesus had lots of ideas about Him: some thought that he was John the Baptist, some Elijah, others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. It is for this reason that Jesus wanted to help his disciples clarify in their minds and hearts who he was, so that they might bear witness to Him in truth.

It is in this context that Peter spoke up: “You are the Christ, he said, the Son of the Living God”. That is a powerful profession of faith. ‘You are the Christ’, that is to say you are the Messiah, the anointed one. Jesus is the Messiah, the one foretold and awaited by the prophets and by the People of Israel for so many years and even centuries. Jesus is the Messiah who has to come to set his people free. ‘The Son of the living God’ is another meaningful title given to Jesus. This title underlines his particular relationship with God founded on his election and the special mission confided to Him. Jesus shares with God a unique filial relationship. Jesus is the chosen one, the unique beloved child of God who enjoys all his favour. In Him, we are all God’s adoptive children. If a unique mission is confided to Jesus for the salvation of the world, that mission is meant to continue through us.

The question Jesus put to his disciples two thousand years ago, is also posed to each one of us today: “Who do **you** say I am?” Jesus is God and man. Jesus is not just a man, even a superman. He is also God. He is not a lifeless god like the pagan gods. Jesus is the living God made man. Jesus is at one and the same time fully human and fully divine.

Jesus is God, he is fully divine, but his divinity does not create a distance between him and us. His divinity does not manifest itself as a crushing power. His divinity does not inspire fear. On the contrary, Jesus is a humble God. Jesus’ throne is the cross. Jesus as God saved the world not by a display of strength and prestige but by his humble passion and death upon the cross. Jesus is God not by living apart, far from us, holding himself at a distance, but by being one of us, espousing our condition. Jesus is near to us. He was like us in all things but sin. In his

relationship with us Jesus is compassionate. His compassion in our regard has a healing, pacifying and saving effect upon us.

Jesus, the Son of God, is at the same time a man, someone fully human. He really suffered his passion. He did not undergo his passion 'as if'. Jesus underwent his passion alone, abandoned by all his followers. His loneliness was already an unimaginable source of suffering to which was added the atrocious physical suffering of his crucifixion. The point to grasp is that Jesus lived his passion and death with a pure and forgiving heart, without anger or desire of revenge. In acting in this way, Jesus manifested his divinity in our humanity. Thus He indicates the way for us to follow if we want to honour our title as 'an adoptive child of God'.

Let us come back to Peter's confession of faith. After Peter's confession, Jesus said to Peter: "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church". There is a play on words with the name of Peter (in Greek Petros) and rock (in Greek petra). The Church is built on the rock which is Peter, that is to say on the faith of Peter. Like Peter we are called to recognize Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of the living God. This is the faith of the Church of which Peter is the guarantor.

Jesus continues to speak to Peter saying: "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".

The theme of the keys is rooted in Isaiah's prophecy which we heard in our first reading: The Lord said to Shebna that he will be replaced as chief steward over the royal household by Eliakim: "I will place the key of the House of David on his shoulder; should he open, no one shall close; should he close, no one shall open". Just as Eliakim was to have command over entry and exit in the royal palace, so Peter is to have charge over entry into and exit from the kingdom of heaven.

We could say that in a certain sense Peter appears as the Prime Minister of the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus. To bind and loose, to open and close can be interpreted in several ways: laying down rules and making exemptions; imposing and lifting excommunications; forgiving and not forgiving sins. The idea is that God will ratify and stand behind what Peter enacts.

In our Roman Catholic Tradition, we believe that what is said of Peter is said also of Peter's successors, the bishops of Rome. Let us take an example. If the kingdom of heaven is a web of relationships between believers who have at heart to love, respect, serve and forgive one another, Peter has for mission to discern if they love, respect, serve and forgive according to the gospel. Is this not exactly what did Pope Francis when he published the apostolic Exhortation on love in the family: *Amoris laetitia*, the Joy of Love? In so doing, Pope Francis helps us to reflect upon the qualities of our love and its weaknesses, and to operate a discernment. Through his teaching, it is God himself who speaks to us.

Today's gospel is an invitation to situate ourselves in our relationship with Christ and with the successor of Peter in the Church today. May the Holy Spirit enlighten us!