

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

August 24, 2014

Isaiah 22:19-23

Psalm 138:1-2, 2-3, 6, 8

Romans 11:33-36

Matthew 16:13-20

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In today's reading from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus chooses Simon Peter as the Rock upon which he will build his Church. Let's think about why. The short answer is that Peter, when questioned, correctly identifies Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God." But when we read further, we find that the substance of Peter's answer isn't the only thing that matters to Jesus. The way that Peter *arrives* at the answer is also important. In fact, it may be the crucial factor in Jesus' choice of Peter. How does Peter *know* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God? Jesus tells Peter, "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father," and *that* is why he is giving Peter the keys of heaven.

I believe that Our Lord is making his choice of Peter on the basis of a passage from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah (31:31-34). Jeremiah lived at a time when the people of Judah had annoyed the great conqueror Nebuchadnezzar once too often. As a consequence, Nebuchadnezzar occupied Jerusalem and deported 8,000 of the city's best and brightest to Babylon. Jeremiah was left behind in Jerusalem, where he shared a message of consolation with the people. The depredations of Nebuchadnezzar had occurred because the people had violated their covenant with the Lord. Jeremiah assured the desolated people that their God had not written them off forever. Rather, God

would establish a *new* covenant with Judah. But why, the people must have wondered, should this new covenant turn out any better than the old one had? What was to prevent them from fouling things up again? What reason was there to believe that they would be any more successful in following God's law than their ancestors had been? Jeremiah promised that that this time would be different because God was going write the divine law on their hearts. Now no one would need to depend on their friends and relatives to teach them to know the Lord. Their new hearts would enable them to know the Lord directly.

I believe that Jesus chose Peter to lead his church because Peter's spontaneous identification of Jesus as the Son of the living God, without having been taught that this was the case, revealed that Peter possessed one of the new hearts promised by God through Jeremiah. Peter knew who Jesus was because his heart told him – his heart of the New Covenant. So far, so good, but the elephant in the room concerns what happens in the next verses of Matthew – verses that are not included in today's Gospel.

Jesus has been telling the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer, die and be raised on the third day. Peter cries out, "God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you." Jesus takes Peter aside and rebukes him saying, "Get behind me Satan! You are an obstacle to me." What, we may ask, has happened to Peter's new heart? The answer is found in Our Lord's next words to Peter: "You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do." So, this time Peter's spontaneous outburst isn't rooted in the knowledge of God written on his heart. He is thinking and speaking in the old too human way – the way that

throughout the history of the Chosen People has led to disaster and desolation.

What are the implications of all this for us? Each of us, by virtue of our Baptism, possesses a New Covenant heart. Because the Holy Spirit dwells in us, we know the Lord in the way promised through Jeremiah. But Peter's experience teaches that we cannot presume that all our thoughts, words and actions will be from that heart. Sadly, like Peter, each of us is still capable of being an obstacle to Christ. Apart from teaching us humility, this knowledge should spur us to live a more intentional discipleship. God's love for us will be the only thing we take for granted. We will practice our faith in the knowledge that it *takes* practice. We will strive to remain in what is traditionally called a "state of Grace," by receiving the Sacraments, encountering Our Lord everyday in prayer, and ever more closely modeling our lives on Christ's. Then, by the Grace of God, we will be better fitted to be entrusted with the keys, and Christ will do great things through us.