

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Isaiah 22:19-23

At various times we have reviewed the three author theory for the Book of Isaiah, the last time being the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time for this cycle. The first reading for this week comes from the first portion, that which has been attributed to Isaiah himself by all scholars. But are there really three authors? Aside from scholarly interests, Jewish-Christian tradition has always recognized Isaiah as the human author of the entire 66 chapters.

After the Psalms, Isaiah is the Old Testament book most quoted in the New Testament: 22 quotations and 13 references (six to the first part of the book and seven to the second) and all the references refer to Isaiah by name.

Three documents testify to the Book of Isaiah having its present form between the second and third centuries B.C. These are the complete Hebrew text discovered in 1947 (the Dead Sea Scrolls), the Greek translations of the Septuagint, and the praise of Isaiah in the Book of Sirach which refers to chapters 40, 51, and 66.

Our reading for today is important in understanding how the king's household (and kingdom) were operated. It goes without saying that we all understand that when the king died, he was replaced by his eldest son (the firstborn, the blessed). But what about all the other positions in the kingdom? What if some official died or wasn't performing up to expectations?

[Thus says the LORD to Shebna, master of the palace,]

This introductory material comes from Isaiah 22:15. The Hebrew word *sofen*, translated as "master," is not found anywhere else in the Old Testament. Non-biblical uses in similar languages support its use as "master of the palace" rather than as "scribe" or "secretary of state." A similar position today would be something like Prime Minister; the minister to whom all the other ministers report.

¹⁹ I will thrust you from your office and pull you down from your station. ²⁰ On that day I will summon my servant Eliakim, son of Hilkiah;

Yahweh is speaking – this is indication of a new day – a new beginning.

²¹ I will clothe him with your robe, and gird him with your sash, and give over to him

your authority.

He will have your distinctive methods of dress, the trappings of your position; as well as the authority which goes with it.

He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah.

This reflects the quality of his rule. He will care for them like they are his own children.

²² I will place the key of the House of David

The key is the absolute symbol of authority over the entire royal palace, in fact, the entire kingdom of David although David himself has been dead for some two hundred years. He who possesses the key has the ability to open the door to whomever he desires and to lock out others.

on his shoulder;

This may represent the actual investiture ceremony.

when he opens, no one shall shut, when he shuts, no one shall open. ²³ I will fix him like a peg in a sure spot, to be a place of honor for his family.

The family shares in the privileges of the official. Notice that although the occupant of the position has changed, the position itself has remained unchanged.

2nd Reading - Romans 11:33-36

Today's second reading continues from where the second reading for the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time left off. Saint Paul is pointing out how the Jews will attain salvation through the example provided by the Gentiles.

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!

Saint Paul is exclaiming, not in awe and fear, but in wonder and gratitude, at the boundless providence of God in arranging the mutual assistance of Jews and Gentiles in attaining salvation. Israel's role in the divine plan of salvation may never have been otherwise.

³⁴ "For who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor?" ³⁵ "Or who has given him anything that he may be repaid?"

Saint Paul is quoting Isaiah 40:13.

“It is clear that only God knows everything and it is only He who lacks nothing, because everything comes from Him. No one can understand or measure this knowledge, because the inferior cannot comprehend what is superior to it. Jewish believers could not understand that the salvation of the Gentiles could be God’s plan and will. Likewise, it seemed unlikely and incredible to the Gentiles that the Jews, who had not believed, could be converted or accepted as believers.” [The Ambrosiaster (ca. A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles* Romans 11,34]

³⁶ For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

This is a doxology to God the Father as creator, sustainer, and goal of the universe. The prayer expresses the absolute dependence of all creation on God. It is much like the doxology we hear at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer “Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, almighty Father, for ever and ever. Amen.”

Gospel - Matthew 16:13-20

While Shebna may have proven not to be a worthy steward of the Davidic kingdom, Simon the fisherman has shown himself worthy of a new mission of stewardship in the Davidic kingdom; a kingdom which now has Jesus as its sovereign. As signs of this new mission of stewardship, Simon is given a new name and the symbol of his office as master of the palace.

¹³ When Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples,

The area where this event is believed to have taken place is at the headwaters of the Jordan River, at the site of a temple to the pagan god Pan. There is a large stone cliff there with the temple carved into it and a spring which feeds a stream which discharges into Lake Merom (which feeds into the Sea of Galilee which feeds into the Jordan River which feeds into the Dead Sea). This site exists even today.

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

The title “Son of Man” is a title which Jesus applies to Himself, it is never applied by His disciples. It refers back to Daniel 7:13.

¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist,

John the Baptist has recently been beheaded. If he has returned, he would have special powers and be able to perform the miracles which Jesus does.

others Elijah,

Popular Jewish thought was that Elijah would return to announce the coming of the messiah [Malachi 4:5 (Malachi 3:23 in the New American Bible and the New Jerusalem Bible)]. Even today when the Passover Seder is celebrated in the Jewish household, a place is set for Elijah.

still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

Jeremiah is the prophet who in his own experience of rejection and suffering announces the rejection and suffering of the messiah.

¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter said in reply,

Although all the disciples had been addressed, Simon takes it upon himself to act as the spokesman and answer for them all.

“You are the Messiah,

The name means “anointed.” Although various figures in ancient Israel were anointed, the term came to be applied most distinctively to kings. Some writings in Jesus’ time used the term to describe Israel’s future leader in the period before and during the end times; he would fulfill Israel’s hopes based on God’s promises.

the Son of the living God.”

Jesus has a unique consciousness of His sonship. Saint Matthew uses this relationship to direct attention away from the military-national connotations of the title “messiah.”

¹⁷ Jesus said to him in reply, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah.

Recall that it was Jonah who announced the impending destruction of Nineveh and effected repentance of the people. This could be an early symbol of Peter’s role.

For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. ¹⁸ And so I say to you, you are Peter,

In Aramaic the word is *kepha*, in Greek it is *petros*. The name means “rock.” No one had ever been named “Rock” before. Some will point out that *petros* means small stone while *petra* means large bolder in Greek. The text reads “You are *petros* and on this *petra* ...” *Petra* is the feminine form of the word and the Church has enough problems without the sacred author calling Peter effeminate. The usage in Greek at the time of Christ did not make a distinction in the meaning of the masculine and feminine forms of the word. In Aramaic, the language which Jesus spoke, *kepha* has no gender. You will see *kepha* transliterated as Cephas (Kephas) in John’s gospel, 1st Corinthians and Galatians.

and upon this rock I will build my church,

The Greek term *ekklesia* is found only here and in Matthew 18:17 in the four gospels.

and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.

The netherworld is *sheol* in Hebrew, *hades* in Greek. It is the abode of the dead; where all departed souls go at the end of their earthly life since heaven has been closed from the time of Adam and Eve and will not be opened until the perfect sacrifice of the messiah. The gates of the netherworld will not prevail because even if the occupant of the office dies, the office will continue.

19 I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

Just as in our first reading, the keys are the symbol of authority – given only to the most trusted servant – the Prime Minister.

Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Again just as in our first reading where the power to open and shut were given, here the ability to bind and loose are given. This is the ability to make the earthly rules for the Church – not change God’s rules, but make the rules which implement His rules. He has full authority on earth, an authority which is bestowed and guaranteed by God. The earthly Church is related to the heavenly kingdom as it mediates salvation in the time between the earthly ministry of Jesus and the future coming of the heavenly kingdom. Binding and loosing are rabbinic technical terms that can refer to binding the devil in exorcism and the juridical acts of excommunication and of definitive decision making (which is a form of teaching through legislation and policy setting). The authority to bind and loose is given to the disciples in Matthew 18:18, but to Peter alone are accorded the revelation, the role of the rock of foundation (see Ephesians 2:20), and especially the keys. Notice that the binding and loosing are initiated on earth but are confirmed in heaven.

20 Then he strictly ordered his disciples to tell no one that he was the Messiah.

By counseling His disciples to be silent, Jesus avoids false interpretation of His messiahship as He prepares them for the instructions that are to follow.

Just as in our first reading, the office of Peter is a perpetual office; in fact it is the same office which was once occupied by Shebna and Eliakim. The position continues even though the occupant changes. Each occupant of the office of Peter is invested with the keys and the responsibility to bind and loose for the entire Church. This is why the popes are called the “Successors of Peter.”

The Magisterium of the Church, in the First Vatican Council, defined the doctrine of the primacy of Peter and his successors in these terms:

“We teach and declare, therefore, according to the testimony of the Gospel that the primacy of jurisdiction over the whole Church was immediately and directly promised to and conferred upon the blessed Apostle Peter by Christ the Lord. For to Simon, Christ had said, ‘You shall be called Cephas’ (John 1:42). Then, after Simon had acknowledged Christ with the confession, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’ (Matthew 16:16), it was to Simon alone that the solemn words were spoken by the Lord: ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and what you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven’ (Matthew 16:17-19). And after His Resurrection, Jesus conferred upon Simon Peter alone the jurisdiction of supreme shepherd and ruler over His whole fold with the words, ‘Feed my lambs ... Feed my sheep’” (John 21:15-17). [...]

“(Canon) Therefore, if anyone says that the blessed Apostle Peter was not constituted by Christ the Lord as the Prince of all the Apostles and the visible head of the whole Church militant, or that he received immediately and directly from Jesus Christ our Lord only a primacy of honor and not a true and proper primacy of jurisdiction: let him be condemned.

“Now, what Christ the Lord, supreme shepherd and watchful guardian of the flock, established in the person of the blessed Apostle Peter for the perpetual safety and everlasting food of the Church must, by the will of the same, endure without interruption in the Church which was founded on the rock and which will remain firm until the end of the world. Indeed, ‘no one doubts, in fact it is obvious to all ages, that the holy and most blessed Peter, Prince and head of the Apostles, the pillar of faith, and the foundation of the Catholic Church, received the keys of the kingdom from our Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior and the Redeemer of the human race; and even to this time and forever He lives,’ and governs, ‘and exercises judgment in his successors’ (cf. Council of Ephesus), the bishops of the holy Roman See, which He established and consecrated with His blood. Therefore, whoever succeeds Peter in this Chair holds Peter’s primacy over the whole Church according to the plan of Christ Himself [...]. For this reason, ‘because of its greater sovereignty,’ it was always ‘necessary for every church, that is, the faithful who are everywhere, to be in agreement’ with the same Roman Church [...].

“(Canon) Therefore, if anyone says that it is not according to the institution of Christ our Lord Himself, that is, by divine law, that Saint Peter has perpetual successors in the primacy over the whole Church; or if anyone says that the Roman Pontiff is not the successor of Saint Peter in the same primacy: let him be condemned [...].

“We think it extremely necessary to assert solemnly the prerogative which the only-begotten Son of God deigned to join to the highest pastoral office. And so, faithfully keeping to the tradition received from the beginning of the Christian faith, for the glory of God our Savior, for the exaltation of the Catholic religion, and for the salvation of the Christian peoples, We, with the approval of the sacred council, teach and define that it is a divinely revealed dogma: that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when, acting in the office of shepherd and teacher of all Christians, he defines, by virtue of his

supreme apostolic authority, doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the universal Church, possesses through the divine assistance promised to him in the person of Saint Peter, the infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed His Church to be endowed in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals; and that such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are therefore irreformable because of their nature, but not because of the agreement of the Church.

“(Canon) But if anyone presumes to contradict this our definition (God forbid that he do so): let him be condemned” (Vatican I, *Pastor aeternus*, chapters 1, 2 and 4).

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