

## **Readings for Sunday the 21<sup>st</sup> Week of the Year**

FIRST READING: Isaiah 22:19-23

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

Thus says the Lord to Shebna, master of the palace: "I will thrust you from your office and pull you down from your station. On that day I will summon my servant Eliakim, son of Hilkiah; I will clothe him with your robe, and gird him with your sash, and give over to him your authority. He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah. I will place the key of the House of David on Eliakim's shoulder; when he opens, no one shall shut when he shuts, no one shall open. I will fix him like a peg in a sure spot, to be a place of honor for his family."

The word of the Lord.

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

***Lord, your love is eternal; do not forsake the work of your hands.***

I will give thanks to you, O Lord, with all my heart, for you have heard the words of my mouth; in the presence of the angels I will sing your praise; I will worship at your holy temple.

***Lord, your love is eternal; do not forsake the work of your hands.***

I will give thanks to your name, because of your kindness and your truth: When I called, you answered me; you built up strength within me.

***Lord, your love is eternal; do not forsake the work of your hands.***

The Lord is exalted, yet the lowly he sees, and the proud he knows from afar. Your kindness, O Lord, endures forever; forsake not the work of your hands.

***Lord, your love is eternal; do not forsake the work of your hands.***

SECOND READING: Romans 11:33-36

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways! *For who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor? Or who has given the Lord anything that he may be repaid?* For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: Matthew 16:13-20

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi and he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter said in reply, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus said to him in reply, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Then he strictly ordered his disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

The Gospel of the Lord.

### **Reflection for Sunday the 21<sup>st</sup> Week of the Year**

Often context is key to understand the meaning of scripture. People's names can be unpronounceable (especially early in the morning). Place names are unfamiliar. Our social structures have a different frame of reference. Who was Shebna and what did he do? Who was Eliakim and why was he the better man for Shebna's job? Why would God have an interest in politics? Isn't it a bad move to combine politics and religion? These questions have an impact on this passage's meaning.

We know of at least two political stances in the time of Isaiah the prophet. The book of Isaiah seems to be a combination of three different authors: First, Second and Third Isaiah. Chapters one to thirty nine were written by First Isaiah, the original one, and dealt with the time before the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, the end of the Davidic line of kings and the exile of the people of Judah. Second Isaiah lived in Diaspora. His message dealt with the repentance of God's people. Third Isaiah promised the restoration of the remnant to the homeland.

First Isaiah prophesied the end of the kingdom of Judah. God's plan was simple. If God's people did not repent, the nation would be destroyed and the people carried into Diaspora. Isaiah was the spokesman for the one side endorsed by God. The other side favored an alliance with Egypt to forestall the cataclysm. Personally, if I were alive then, I would have probably sided with forestalling catastrophe. Shebna was the comptroller of the king's palace in Jerusalem. He controlled the money along with the key to the palace. He may have been the leader of the opposition to Isaiah. Eliakim was Isaiah's candidate. Judah was a monarchy not a democracy. Isaiah uses the words, "I will thrust you from your office and pull you down from your station," to describe the process. This connotes violence, scandal and perhaps a coup de tat. Shebna and Eliakim would not be voted out and voted in, respectively.

Apparently this office was one of great authority for, as Comptroller of the king's palace, he would have influence with the king with regards to policy. Isaiah gave a job description that includes, "He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah." Perhaps there was a religious aspect to the position as well. The King of Judah was anointed with perfumed oil as sign that God chose him as the anointed of God or messiah. The kings of Judah were not just in a political position. They were also a religious figure having been anointed priest, prophet and king. This was a tradition going back to Moses, who acted in those roles. A priest offers sacrifice for the people's and his sins. A prophet listens to and then proclaims God's Word. The king judges and rules the people.

In Isaiah's vision of faith, one needed to be aligned only with God and God's will. To do otherwise was to be in rebellion to God. Eliakim would have shared Isaiah's point of

view and therefore knew God's will. For us in the USA, this is foreign territory. We have the concept of the separation of Church and State. We may have leaders and politicians who believe in God and may be faithful in their practice of faith, but our system of government is of, for and by the people (my apologies to Abraham Lincoln for the paraphrase). Our form of government is a republic not a theocracy. Whenever we expect any political leader or government official to be a savior, we will get into trouble. A political leader may prioritize the economy to save money but won't save souls. Only God can do that.

In Isaiah's time, the king was to act in accord with God's will. The problem was that the king did not. This not only led the king to perdition but the entire nation too. The Babylonian army would carry off both king and people into Diaspora. As I relate this background I relate the history and culture of those times. Sometimes I have to wonder why people do self defeating and destructive things. We face some of these same problems today.

Paul asked a significant question in today's second reading, "Who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor?" We know who advises our government's officials. We see their images on television and know some of their names. Who advises God? After all, don't we try to do that with some of our prayers? Don't we ask God why some things happen or don't? God's ways are indeed mysterious and inscrutable. Was Paul praising God or stating his frustration in prayer? We have been facing this pandemic since March. I'm getting tired. How long, O Lord? Incline your ear to the sound of our pleading!

Some may be afraid to express any negative or harsh word to God. If I tell God that I'm disappointed that God has not ended this pandemic yet, will God worsen the plague or kill the one who wonders? Why do we pray? God already knows how we feel and think. God already knows what we want and need. We are all made in God's image and likeness and have a share in God's spirit. Our prayers benefit us. Through them it is we, not God, who already knows us completely, who can become more aware of our thoughts, feelings, wants and needs. When we pray we spent time with God. "Why," can be a powerful word. When we use it, it shows our wonder and awe of mysteries that surround us.

When young children ask us why, what do we answer? Why do I have to take out the trash? Because I said so? That answer won't continue to cut it. Taking out the trash is necessary for health and hygiene. It is one of the most important tasks for healthy, home living. We all have a lot to do and we need help. A young one may prefer face time on their phone, computer or favorite TV show. Taking out the trash may be a smelly inconvenience. It is also helping to relieve one they love of more work. To ask if they would rather help dad or not help him may give meaning to the umbrage.

To find some meaning in senseless things or finding purpose in confusion can only happen when we approach others honestly. We can do it with each other through dialogue or in prayer with God. Any time we approach God in any way with any thing, we pray. Prayer can come from our deepest place. It could be love, joy, anger, fear, worry or in sin; it is always prayer. Prayer serves to unite the one who prays with God.

Who is Jesus? I can answer that by rote. Jesus is the Messiah, Son of God, God eternal, our brother and our Savior (this doctrinal list is by no means complete). That's more an

answer to another question. Who does the Church say Jesus is? Jesus actual question is different. "Who do You say that I am?" or stated differently, "Who am I to You?" Jesus asked Peter for his personal experience. Who would each of us answer?

This gospel from Matthew is half of the story. Yes, we hear Jesus' blessing. Jesus founds the Church. We, as Catholics, can hear the establishment of the papacy. We can take pride in the proof texting that the Catholic Church is the One, True Church. Those things miss the point. They are related to Doctrine and do not answer the question Jesus really asked. The answer to Jesus question is personal. The Church teaches doctrine, but Jesus wants each of us to answer from our hearts. What is your answer?

This story continued (in next Sunday's gospel) with Jesus telling the disciples, now that they knew him, the nature of his mission. Jesus was to be arrested, tried, beaten and hung on a tree like someone lynched, executed like a criminal. Peter took Jesus aside and said, "Would that not happen to you, Lord!" Jesus response was swift and sharp, "Get behind me you Satan! Cursed be you for you are trying to make me trip and fall. You judge not by God's standards but by your own!"

Let's look at Peter. Who was he? We refer to him now as St. Peter. Peter is a nick-name. It may be more ironic in nature; how dependable was Peter? He was born Simon Bar Jonah (in English Simon Son of John). He was a fisherman. Fishing was big business and lucrative. Peter and the other eleven lads traveled with Jesus on his journeys. They may have left their families to do so, but not without financial support. Modern archeologists have uncovered a fishermen's village that seemed quite affluent. Some of the well-proportioned homes had mosaic floors. Peter was impulsive and often acted as a spokesman with Jesus. He may have had an exaggerated sense of self. We just heard of Peter trying to walk on water and how Jesus had to go fishing for him. We heard Peter stammer, "Let us build three huts..." during the Transfiguration. As the authorities came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, it is Peter who drew his sword and drew Malchus' blood. Peter denied Jesus three times during Jesus' trial. We have heard Peter's ignorant comments and questions. This guy was the pattern for the Peter Principle. "Incompetency seeks its own level."

Jesus' response to Peter's profession of faith is a powerful blessing, "Blessed are you Simon, Son of John, for no one revealed this to you but my heavenly Father. I, for my part declare that you are Rocky, and upon this 'rock' I will build my Church against which the jaws of death shall not prevail." After Peter's unfortunate gaff, with Jesus equally strong curse, does Jesus take back the blessing? Does Jesus eat his own words? No, he does not. Although Jesus called him the devil incarnate, Peter showed that he, like so often in the gospel, didn't get it. Jesus predicts his death four times in the gospel of Matthew. Each time the disciples enter as state of denial. This is the second time. Peter was nothing but predictable. If Jesus was merely human, his curse may have negated the blessing. Jesus has two natures, though. Jesus is fully human and fully divine. Peter remained faithful and turned to Jesus after every mistake and sin. Peter also returned to Jesus upon martyrdom. God's blessing remained with Peter. God's blessing remains with us.

Peter was valuable to Jesus. What was that value? Peter and Jesus were brothers. Their bond was strong. Peter actively sought out Jesus and followed him. Peter's faith and witness continued throughout the rest of his life and ministry. Martyr means witness. Peter's martyrdom ended his journey to Jesus. If someone as flawed and incompetent

gains eternal life, what awaits each of us? Don't we seek Jesus and follow? Aren't we Jesus' sisters and brothers? Isn't Jesus our brother? We are family as we do this now, together at mass.

I pray that your resolve stays strong in Jesus; keep washing your hands often, keep six feet distance from others and wear a mask in public. May the grace of God give us all what we lack.

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