

## Keys for Church built upon Rock

**Twenty-first Sunday of the Year** – Cycle A – August 23, 2020

**Readings:** Isa 22:19-23; Rom 11:33-36; Mt 16:13-20

*“You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church. ....  
I will give you the keys of the kingdom” (Mt)*

Prologue: The first reading and the gospel passage share a common symbol: *keys*. Additionally, the gospel has two other key terms: *rock* and *church*. In my recent book entitled; ‘*Saint Romero and Pope Francis: Revolutionaries of Tender Love*’,<sup>1</sup> I have reflected upon the three terms—community, identity, mission[C-I-M]—roughly parallel to church, rock, key, respectively. These three terms and images provide rich material for reflection, prayer and breaking of the word of God.

### Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. In the first reading—the only individual prophecy in Isaiah—the prophet foretells the doom of Shebna, the prime minister or governor, so to say, who abused his power by urging King Hezekiah (716–687 BC) to wage war against the Assyrians by seeking the help of the Egyptians. Isaiah was totally opposed to this, and advised the king to trust in Yahweh, God, rather than seek help from the so-called ‘pagans’. His advice went unheeded, leading to doom and destruction. Thus, Shebna, who is guilty of pride, arrogance and readiness to depend on arms rather than trust in God is replaced by the lowly Eliakim whose name in Hebrew literally means ‘*whom God sets up*’. Shebna’s name appears once more in Isa 36:3 simply designated as ‘secretary’. Of Eliakim’s office, Isaiah predicts that “I [God] will place on his shoulder *the key* of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open” (v.22). In the Biblical world, as is common today, too, officials were invested with keys as sign of stewardship, authority and power. The “shoulder” could either refer to the emblem of a key that was sometimes embroidered on the shoulders of the robes of officials or to the literal carrying the key on one’s shoulder since keys made in ancient times were not small as they are today! Anyway, Eliakim is symbolized as “a peg in a secure place” (v.23)—all these symbols taking deeper meaning in the context of Peter’s special role in the new community that Jesus will form.
2. The symbol of the key reappears in today’s gospel passage (v.19) and again in the Book of Revelation (1:18; 3:7) referring to the Messiah. However, notably, Matthew purposefully puts the spotlight on Simon, son of Jonah, often seen as the spokesman in his gospel: for instance, in 14:28-33 in the narrative of attempting to walk on the water; in 15:15 asking for an explanation of the parable; in 18:21 showing readiness to forgive seven times! Here, to Jesus’ question, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (v.13), the disciples answer with popular messianic predictions that he is a prophet like Elijah, Jeremiah or John the Baptist. But Peter alone solemnly declares: “You are the Christ [or Messiah], the Son of the living God” (v.16). In Jewish imagination, the Messiah [Christ] is inconceivable without a messianic community. Thus, when Peter recognizes Jesus as Messiah, Jesus installs him as the foundation stone of the messianic community, the church, saying: “You are Peter—Greek, *Petros*— and on this rock I will build my church.” (v.18)

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<sup>1</sup> Published by Pauline Sisters, Mumbai, 2019. See chapters 3 & 4, pages 37-58, for more details on this text.

3. Jesus' blessing on Peter and giving him a meaningful name indicate that God has taken hold of Peter in a special way. Henceforth, Peter will lead the group of disciples. Renaming a person in the Biblical tradition symbolizes entrusting that person with a new mission (e.g., Gen 17:5 Abram to Abraham; 32:28 Jacob to Israel). Interestingly, the name 'rock' (Aramic, *Kepha*) is not known to have been used of any other person either in Hebrew or Greek. Its associations are drawn from Isa 51:1 and 28:16 and applied to Jesus himself (Mt 21:42). This implies that Peter will play a special role in the new Jesus-community symbolized by his holding the "keys of the kingdom of heaven." Denial and desertion of Jesus notwithstanding, Peter—who is all too human, sinful and fallible—will only later (after the resurrection and Pentecost) understand his mission well when he refers to himself as "servant and apostle" (2 Pet 1:1) and advises everyone "to serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received" (1 Pet 4:10). Moreover, just as Eliakim is given the power "to open and to shut", so too is Peter—and by extension Christ's Body in history, the Church—is given the mission "to bind and to loose" (v.19), which refers to the ministry of reconciliation.

**Linking the Second Reading and Psalm to the Theme:** Paul ends his teaching about salvation to the community at Rome with a hymn of praise: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (v.33). God's ways are truly mysterious and unimaginable to human beings. Why would Jesus choose a lowly fisherman, Peter, or a persecutor, Paul, to be cornerstones of his newborn church? Strange, indeed! The praise of God is echoed in the response to the psalm: "Your love, O Lord, is eternal!" God loves you and me throughout our lifetimes and beyond .... Jesus chose Peter; He chooses you.

**Triple Concern in the Covid Context:**

1. Community/Church is no longer a building we have to go to. The lockdown has made us realize that Jesus is present where two or three are gathered in his name (Mt 18:20). There is need to revive the 'domestic church' of family members who pray together, stay together.
2. Identity/Renaming is important; for Jesus asks: "Who do *You* say I am?" What personalized answer would you give him? What name and identity does Jesus give *you*, today?
3. Mission: is at the heart of church membership and Christian discipleship. An important detail is that the gospel scene takes place in Caesarea Philippi, namely, in Gentile territory. The Church's mission is, thus, universal: to be 'servant of the world'. Am I joyful and generous in the service of God and God's people?

**In Lighter Vein:** Late one evening, a man lost the key of his moneybox and went down on fours looking for it outside. His neighbours joined him in searching under streetlights till all were tired. "Where did you lose the key?" asked a concerned friend. "Inside my house," replied the man. "Then why look for it outside?" "Because," he explained, "there's more light outside than inside my house!" When we lose keys to life within ourselves, it's futile to look outside to find them. Jesus entrusts the 'key' of the Church to Peter, and through the popes down the century to you and me, his disciples. It's necessary to open ourselves from within in order to identify him and proclaim, like Peter: "You are the Christ, the son of the living God" .... And, to live out that Christic identity and mission always.

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