

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

August 23, 2020

Homily of Most Reverend Mario Yamanouchi Michiaki

Bishop of the Diocese of Saitama

**"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:19).**

Today is the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time. Before commenting on the readings of the Mass, I would like to make a reference to the ordering of the readings of the Sunday Masses according to the renewal of the Catholic Church brought by the Second Vatican Council.

**Illuminating the life of faith from the Word of God**

Let us recall that the liturgical renewal was brought about by the Second Vatican Council (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 1963) so that Christians' life of faith may be illuminated through attentive listening to the Word of God as social changes are accelerating now. It was in 1981 that *the Order of Mass Readings* was published, which we continue to use in our liturgy today.

The fundamental criteria for this choice was that Christians might have a better knowledge of the Word of God. First, we are to discover the different events narrated in the Old Testament as the history of God who accompanies humanity throughout the centuries and to take them to our hearts, for through the people of Israel the principal events, customs and teachings have been transmitted.

The liturgical renewal made the ordering of the readings in two series: the Sundays and the weekdays. For example, every Mass on Sundays and solemnities have three readings and the responsorial psalm. The texts of the Old Testament are chosen because of their relationship with the Gospel. Hence, in the Sunday Mass, we realize that between the first reading and the Gospel they illuminate each other and discover something common between them despite their historical distance.

Moreover, this Sunday series is divided into three annual cycles of A, B and C. This year, 2020, we are in Year A. In Year A we read the Gospel of Matthew, in Year B the Gospel of Mark and in Year C the Gospel of Luke. In Advent, Christmas Season, Lent and Easter

Season, the texts are chosen taking into account the particularity of each time.

This means that in three years, if we normally participate in the Sunday masses, we can listen to the four Gospel stories altogether so that our life of faith can be enlightened and related to the main events and sayings of Jesus.

Now let us turn to today's first reading. Let us place this short passage in its historical context: It mentions the symbolic "key" given to Shebna, the steward of the royal palace of Jerusalem, who was too self-seeking and demanding to be worthy of the position. This is linked to the Gospel: Jesus gave the keys to Simon Peter to make him the foundation stone of the Church.

**First reading (Isaiah 22:19-23): I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David**

The text of Isaiah most likely refers to the time immediately before the First Exile. In 597 BC, in retaliation for an attempted rebellion, the Babylonian Empire forcibly took the most important members with cultural and professional skills in Judah as workforce at various cities and fields in Mesopotamia. This was a severe blow to Israel's faith, perhaps like no other in its history: it was as if God had failed, that he was defeated and could not fulfill his promise to keep the House of David forever. Their faith in the God of promises, the God of King David, collapsed.

In this passage appears Shebna, the steward of the royal palace of Jerusalem. He was in charge of the key of the king's palace but abused his power to stay in power. This kind of arrogance is a manifestation of the collapse of the royal system and reveals that the court is at a standstill.

In face of this situation, Isaiah pronounces an oracle of condemnation against this steward, accusing him of a self-seeking injustice that he had committed and signaling the end of what he had been doing.

**Gospel (Matthew 16:13-20): You are Peter.... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.**

This text reflects a fact as understood and lived by the community of Matthew: it is about identifying the person of Jesus. First, Jesus asks what people think of him. This question,

which was open in Jesus' time, is still open to us today.

The answer can be given from two points of view: From the human perspective, people evaluate who Jesus is; from the divine perspective, the Holy Spirit reveals who Jesus is to Peter. People of good will witness Jesus' activity, see him as a very special envoy from God to prepare for the time of salvation. Peter declares that Jesus is the awaited Messiah. Jesus emphasizes this by declaring that the confession comes from a revelation of God the Father (Matthew 11:27). Therefore, the new name given by Jesus, Peter, has a special meaning.

Then Jesus goes on to declare the specific role of Simon Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:19).

Jesus proposes to build a temple, a new community in which Peter will be its foundation stone. The word Peter, or Petra, means a chair, a stone, and a rock on which a building stands. That building is the community called the Church: it belongs to Jesus, and it is his desire. Jesus desires Peter to have a central mediating role with the keys. Against the Church of Jesus no human power nor evil can overcome it.

This text has given rise to numerous discussions between Catholics and Protestants about the figure of the Pope as Peter's successor. The Catholic tradition holds that these words apply to Peter and to all who succeed him in the task of presiding in faith and love. The Protestant tradition, however, has seen in Jesus' words a praise and a promise not to the person of Peter, but to his attitude of faith.

### **A key question for us today**

Jesus' question, "But who do you say that I am?" is also addressed to us, to the Church today, in face of this pandemic: Who do I say that Jesus is? What is Jesus to me? Who is he?

### **Prayer**

As Christians, disciples of Jesus, may we know how to live together in a spirit of solidarity with all those around us, opening especially the doors of our hearts to those most in need because of the crisis caused by the coronavirus. Let us pray to the Lord.

Note: All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE).