

21st Sunday in ordinary Time Year A

Ferntree Gully News letter

Isaiah 22:19-23 Romans 11:33-36 Matthew 16:13-20

In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet says to Romeo, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." *The Journal of the American Medical Association* did a study on the names of people in the medical profession in the United States. Doctors' names included: Needle, Probe, Lance, Ligate, Drill, Scope, Bolt, Pin, Croak and Klutz. On the up side, we find physicians named Fix, Cure, Heal, Brilliant, Able, and Best. Our vet's name is Dr. Fish. There is an Episcopal priest in New York City named Donald Goodness. Do names make a difference? Can a person's name determine his or her destiny? If you had the choice, would you pick Dr. Brilliant or Dr. Klutz? Many actors will take a stage name because their real name is considered unattractive, dull, or amusing for the wrong reason, or because it projects the wrong image, or is considered too "ethnic." Today's Gospel describes how Jesus, who gave Simon a new name, Peter, made him the bedrock foundation of his Church.

In today's first reading we hear of God choosing Eliakim to exercise headship over Israel. It is God who speaks; God who determines; God who sets the agenda. The fundamental question whether God determines how the efforts of religion will be directed. Isaiah is directed by God to announce that a royal official named Shebna will soon be replaced. God refers to Shebna with the dismissive word, that official, while his replacement Eliakim carries the noble title my servant. God says that he will place on his shoulders the key of the house of David; he shall open and none shall shut; and he shall shut and none shall open. Shebna was one of the court officials had put his trust in human resources than in God. He had tried to persuade Hezekiah to revolt against Assyria by sending for Egyptian support and amass large forces of chariots rather than serve God of Israel. Consequently, God commanded Isaiah to relate a message to him. Eliakim as the servant of God received his authority directly from God who clothes him in robe and sash, symbols of his office. God further describes Eliakim as a father to the people of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah since he will give priority to their welfare. He will carry the key of the house of David around his neck. What Eliakim shall open, no one shall shut; what he shall shut, no one shall open. Eliakim will not fail those who rely on him for support and influence.

In the previous chapters of his Letter to the Romans, Paul has been describing God's love for Jews and gentiles, and his merciful dealings with them. He concludes this section of his letter with a hymn of praise for God's infinite wisdom and mercy, which is something far beyond what we humans can imagine. Paul thinking on the nature, wisdom and knowledge of God, is simply astounded. The nature and the gifts of God are infinite, and therefore no finite mind can grasp or adequately conceive of them. A man has human nature, knowledge and wisdom. But God is the divine nature, divine knowledge and divine wisdom. It is useless therefore for man with his limited mind to try to grasp fully the decisions made by God or the wisdom he employed in carrying them out. Paul here quotes Isaiah to make his point where the prophet declares that no human being is able to understand God's ways and no man can ever advise him, for God knows all truth and everything is present to him. He does not have to forecast or guess the future as human beings do. God is dependent on no creature. He is always self-sufficient and independent of all creatures. Paul then gives glory to God, emphasizing that God is at the beginning, the

continuation and the final realization of everything good that has come into being. All creatures must give him honour in all times and places.

In the Gospel of today we have the profession of faith by Peter in the messiahship of Jesus. In response Jesus confers on Peter the primacy and leadership in the church he was establishing. At the same time Jesus tells him that he will be the foundation of his church and grants him the gift of infallibility. Here we recall a high point in Jesus' relationship with his disciples. They had been with Jesus for nearly three years. They had heard his teaching and seen his miracles. He had even sent them out on a mission to heal and to preach. They were attached to Jesus and had grown in their understanding of him. It took them quite a while to become aware who Jesus really was. He was a popular person, a great leader and wonderful teacher. Yet, as the rest of the Gospel clearly indicates, they still did not fully understand the implications of what they had just begun to realize. Some had even expressed doubt about Jesus even after the resurrection. Mark, in particular, likes to emphasize their poor understanding with regard to the identity and teaching of Jesus. The first person in his Gospel to recognize Jesus fully was a pagan soldier at the foot of the Cross. At that moment, Jesus' disciples, his chosen followers, were nowhere to be seen. Today's passage is really an expression of the faith of the early Church rather than just that of the disciples at the time of the event described.

The incident took place at Caesarea Philippi, where Jesus asks his disciples who the Son of Man is. This was the place known for its temples and particularly outstanding was the great marble temple dedicated to the godhead of Caesar. This was understood as a place where many religions met. The city was twenty miles north of the Sea of Galilee built by Tetrarch Philip in one A.D. Here Jesus starts asking his disciples the question, what people are saying about him. Jesus calls himself "Son of Man" here, thus identifying himself with the Messianic figure in the seventh chapter of Daniel, which says: "Behold with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man... to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him."

In response the disciples tell him that people think he is John the Baptist, executed recently by Herod and raised to life. Some think him to be Prophet Elijah who went to heaven in a fiery chariot without tasting death and was expected to return as a sign of the imminent coming of the Messiah. Others thought him to be prophet Jeremiah, who had hidden the Ark of the Covenant and he was expected to show it before the coming of the Messiah. What is clear is that while Jesus is seen by the people as a prophet, a spokesperson for God, and no more than that. However, he is concerned about the reaction of his disciples. And he focuses directly on them and elicits their response. It was important for Jesus to see whether the message he preached is properly understood by the disciples. Peter immediately responds in the name of all the disciples and tells him that he is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. In the Greek, Messiah is Christos, which means the 'Anointed One'. This was a moment of joy for Jesus as his close friends had recognized him and his mission was partly successful.

Peter, speaking on behalf of the community, said without any hesitation that they were assured that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Son of the living God. He is someone extraordinary. Jesus now turns his attention to Peter and confers on him the blessing for the response he gave. Jesus recognizes Peter's response to be the result of divine revelation and beyond what

any human could have known from human knowledge alone. He tells him: "Simon, son of Jonah, you are a happy man. Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but it is my Father in heaven who revealed this to you." Only faith could have led Peter to say what he did. Jesus uses this divine revelation as a basis for granting Peter a special role in the establishing of the church. He then declares Peter to be blessed, as God has conferred on him special grace to differ from his unbelieving countrymen. Further Jesus adds that he would be called Peter, in allusion to his stability or firmness in professing the truth.

The word translated "rock," is not the same word as Peter, but is of a similar meaning. Nothing can be more wrong than to suppose that Christ meant the person of Peter was the rock. Without doubt Christ himself is the Rock, the tried foundation of the church. Peter's confession is the firm expression to his doctrine. If Jesus be not the Christ, those that own him are not of the church. Immediately after this Jesus declared the authority with which Peter would be invested. He spoke in the name of his brethren, and this related to them as well as to him. They had no total knowledge of the characters of men, and were liable to mistakes; but they would be kept from error in stating the way of acceptance and salvation, the rule of obedience, the believer's character and experience, and the final destiny of unbelievers and those who deliberately stray away. In such matters the decision of the disciples was right, and it would be confirmed in heaven. He gave also the power to forgive sins of people the function that belongs to God alone. They will now be the messengers of God.

The words binding and loosing, in the common language of the Jews, signified to forbid and to allow, or to teach what is lawful or unlawful and Jesus gives Peter and his companions this power. Jesus tells Peter that whatever he binds on earth shall be considered bound in heaven. It indicates that God's own authority passes through Jesus to the community he will leave behind. Whatever they decide corporately under the leadership of Peter and the Apostles will be acknowledged by God. They can do this because they will later be given the Spirit as Teacher and Protector and, through the same Spirit, Jesus will be with them forever. They will be the Body of Christ and when they speak as a body, Christ speaks. Then there is the promise of endurance against all assaults of evil. It is a promise that has been remarkably kept through the twenty centuries down to our own day. It is a testimony to the firmness of a foundation whose strength basically comes from Truth and Love. As long as these divinely originating qualities are in the Church, and any part of it, there is nothing to fear. Peter is then given a special stewardship and responsibility for the community. He is given the authority, the keys of the kingdom of heaven."

Thus, in the Gospel to show Peter's authority Jesus tells him that he would give him the keys of the kingdom of heaven. We need to pay attention to the symbolism of the keys which are the expression of domestic authority. To have keys to a place designates a special kind of power as in receiving the charge of a house or vehicle. In the past when kings ruled over people, whosoever was given the keys by the king was the highest official in the realm under the king, a chief executive officer. The symbolism of the keys would not escape people in those days. The symbolism of the keys here expresses the authority given by Jesus to Peter and his successors. The meaning of the conferral of the keys could not be explained or rationalized away, as many rationalize it today when they view the Church as merely a political institution. The keys to the kingdom come from God and from no one else. Peter has been given the authority of the keys directly by Jesus. As such he is to interpret God's will as Jesus has revealed it in order to lead

people into the Kingdom of Heaven. It is very clear that Peter's entire commission is for the purpose of his being a rock of surety and the guarantee of the teaching of Jesus. The Church comes from God which is constituted by God. From a human secular perspective, it is merely a voluntary association of like-minded individuals. The Church from God's perspective is quite something else. It is the Body of Christ, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus ordered His disciples not to tell anyone that He was the Messiah, surely, the disciples must have misunderstood his strange command. They would have liked to experience the glory of the Messiah and relish his popularity. They could not surely understand the mysterious ways of the Lord, that the Kingdom of God was not a physical Kingdom. From today's reading we learn that sometimes in life, we do not understand why things happen the way they do. But surely, God who is everywhere, knows all, sees all and is in control of all situations. Every event, although mysterious at the time of its occurrence, serves a spiritual purpose for our individual spiritual growth and for the benefit of the Church as a whole. This week, let us take the time to reflect on our past. Let us take the time to reflect on the mysterious ways of the Lord that have led us to where we are today. Let us take the time to perceive what our Heavenly Father has done for us so we may grow in the fruit of the Holy Spirit. When our eyes are opened to the mysteries of the Lord, let us take a moment to thank Him for that entire He has done for us, glorifying Him in His Most Holy Name.

There is a beautiful story about the pencil. The pencil maker took the pencil aside, just before putting it into the box. "There are five things you need to know," he told the pencil, "before I send you out into the world. Always remember them and never forget, and you will become the best pencil you can be. One: You will be able to do many great things, but only if you allow yourself to be held in someone's hand. Two: You will experience a painful sharpening from time to time, but you'll need it to become a better pencil. Three: You will be able to correct any mistakes you might make. Four: The most important part of you will always be what's inside. And Five: On every surface you are used on, you must leave your mark. No matter what the condition, you must continue to write." The same applies to each one of us too. When we find an answer to Jesus' question ("Who do **you** say that I am?"), we will be able to make ourselves useful to our contemporaries. We have to undergo the process that the pencil undergoes. One: We will be able to do many great things, but only if we allow ourselves to be held in God's hand, and allow other human beings access to the many gifts we possess. Two: We will experience a painful sharpening from time to time, by going through various problems in life, but we'll need it to become a stronger person. Three: We will be able to correct any mistakes we might make. Four: The most important part of us will always be what's on the inside. And Five: On every surface we walk through, we must leave our mark. No matter what the situation, we must continue to do our duties to the best of our abilities. God bless you all.

JOKE

"But how did the other ear get burned?": On Sunday morning, a man showed up at Church with both his ears terribly blistered, so his pastor asked, "WHAT happened to YOU?" "I was lying on the couch watching a ball game on TV while my wife was ironing nearby. I was totally engrossed in the game when she went out, leaving the iron near the phone. The phone rang, and keeping my eyes on the TV, I grabbed the hot iron and put it to my ear." "How dreadful," gasped the pastor. "But how did the other ear get burned?" "Well, you see, I'd no sooner hung up and the guy called back!" He just didn't get it. Lots of folks never get it, never understand how life really works, even at the simplest levels. That's why Jesus is pressing his followers — and us — so insistently in today's Gospel: "Do you understand Who I AM," he asks, "and what My being here means for you?" (Msgr. Dennis Clarke).