

YOU ARE PETER.....I WILL GIVE YOU THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN
Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Matthew 16,13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! 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 gates 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 whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

The Gospel this Sunday. Matthew 16, 13-20, is very important also for the history of the church. What is the context? Jesus warned his disciples from the teachings of the Pharisees, a religious doctrine layed down by the god's of the law, that of sacrifice, merit, the pure and the impure. Jesus wants them to understand that God is a father who is only love. To do this he takes them to the extreme north of the country – to the gentile land - to Caesarea Philippi, a city that was under construction, where there is one of the three sources of the Jordan and above all where there was a great chasm, a cave, which was believed to be the entrance to the Kingdom of the dead.

Here in this place away therefore far from the influence of the Pharisees - Jesus asks his disciples “*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*” And the evangelist contrasts the son of man – with the man who has the divine condition - and man who does not. The answer is disappointing and the answer is a consequence of the confusion that the disciples have in mind and of the preaching they had done. In fact they speak of all the characters of the past, the great reformers; some say John the Baptist because it was thought that the martyrs would rise again; others Elijah, the famous prophet who was to come before the messiah; others Jeremiah or some of the prophets. All the answers concern the past, they did not understand the newness of Jesus: they are all characters who were reformers of institutions, but Jesus did not come to reform institutions, but a eliminate them What was believed to allow communion with God, for Jesus it obstructed it.

So Jesus asks “*But who do you say that I am?*” Simon Peter answers for all of them “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*” Finally one of the disciples, Simon Peter, understands that Jesus he is not the son of David, but the son of God. The son of David is the one who resembles the famous King David, who imposed the kingdom by taking the lives of his enemies, the son of God is he who will gives his life even for his enemies. So finally Simon Peter understands, but we will see this reality lasts for only a short time.

And Jesus praises him, calls him blessed, he is the beatitude of the pure, those who see God, and calls him “*...Simon Bar-Jonah!*” Why son of Jonah? Who is Jonah? Because Jonah is the only

prophet who did exactly the opposite of what God had commanded him. God had commanded him to preach conversion to Nineveh and Jonah went elsewhere; but in the end he was converted. So calling Peter the son of Jonah, Jesus shows what Peter's itinerary will be, always in opposition to Jesus, but then in the end he will be converted.

And Jesus affirms that it is the Father who revealed this to him. And here is a very difficult verse, but not so much for the content as for the translations. Let's see: "*And I tell you, you are Peter, ..*" Peter comes from the Greek word "petros" which indicates a stone, a brick or in any case something suitable for a construction – "*.. and on this rock..*" and the evangelist uses the term "petra" which is not the feminine of "petros", but means rock. So, Jesus is saying "You are a brick, a stone, on this stone, on this rock which is me"; Jesus had already spoken of this rock, it is the one where man builds his house and when the floods, rain and winds came, it remained firm. The rock is faith in Jesus or Jesus himself, so this distinction is important between "petros" which means brick and "petra" meaning the rock on which to build.

Since finally one of the disciples has understood that he is the Son of the God who communicates life, Jesus says "*I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*" The place is important: we have said that there was this famous cave or grotto that was believed to be the entrance to the kingdom of the dead; life is stronger than death.

Jesus continues "*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven,..*" remember that the Kingdom of heaven in Matthew's gospel did not mean the afterlife, but the alternative society that Jesus came to inaugurate. These keys that we imagine that Peter uses to open and close, they are not those, what's the meaning of the keys? The one who was given the keys to the city was the responsible for the health and well-being of the people in it; this is the meaning to holding the keys.

And then Jesus uses a typical expression of the rabbis, "*..whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*" It is the rabbinic language used to indicate teaching, interpreting the law, declaring the doctrine true or not. It is the scribes who had the keys to science. So Jesus assures that a community that is based on faith in the living God and therefore puts the object of creation, the good and the well-being of man first, the teaching of this community is endorsed by heaven.

But something had not gone well. Jesus then ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ, why? If Peter answered right, why not divulge it? Because Peter did not answer right. "*The Christ*" with the definite article indicates the messiah of tradition, the one who will be the winner, the one who will conquer with power; then Jesus commands not to say it and then he will begin to explain what is the reality of the true messiah. And here there will be the clash with Peter, the one who was called "*building stone*" after a few minutes becomes a stone of scandal.