

**YOU ARE PETER, AND I WILL GIVE YOU THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN – Biblical  
Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM**

***Mt 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.***

To keep his disciples away from the influence of the Pharisees, that is from the teachings of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, Jesus takes them a long way away from the Jewish religious institution and takes them to the extreme north of the country. As Matthew writes in chapter 16, 13-20.

*"Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi..",* Caesarea Philippi is at the extreme north of the country, it is the city built by the son of Herod the Great, Philip, and to distinguish it from the other maritime Caesarea, it was called Caesarea Philippi.

At the time of Jesus the city was in construction. This is a detail to keep in mind, near the city one of the three sources of the river Jordan is found, which was also considered the kingdom of the dead. So, they are elements that need to be kept in mind to understand what the evangelist tells us.

So, Jesus takes His disciples so far away from Judea and Galilee to ask them a question. *"...he asked his disciples, « Who do people..»",* meaning *"mankind, «..say that the Son of Man is? »* The evangelist sets mankind against the Son of man, who has the divine condition, therefore has the Spirit, and those that do not.

Jesus wants to know Himself what is the state of the effect of the preaching of the disciples that He had sent to announce the novelty of the kingdom. The reply is disappointing. *"they said, «Some say John the Baptist»"* because one believed that the martyrs would immediately raise. *"« ...others say Elijah..»",*

Elijah, according to tradition, was not dead, but had been abducted in heaven and would return at the arrival of the future Messiah.

“«...others Jeremiah...»”, always according to the tradition they had managed to escape being stoned, “«or one of the prophets»”. One expected one of the prophets announced by Moses, however all ancient personages. No one, not the disciples nor the people to whom they had spoken, had understood the novelty brought by Jesus.

Then Jesus says “«...who do you say that I am? »”, he turns to the whole group. Jesus speaks to all the group of disciples, but only one of them takes the initiative. “Simon Peter replied,..” Simon is his name, Peter is the negative nickname that indicates his stubbornness, and when the evangelist presents him with this name, it means that there is something contrary to Jesus’ announcement.

“Simon Peter replied, «You are the Christ, the Son of the living God»”. Finally there is one of the disciples that had understood that Jesus is not the son of David, the one that uses force to impose the kingdom, but Jesus is the son of God (literally) the living, meaning he communicates life. “And Jesus answered him, «Blessed are you, Simon »”. Why blessed? Peter is pure of heart and therefore can see God.

He says “blessed”, but he calls him “«Bar-Jonah! »”. (son of Jonah) “Son” in the Jewish culture did not only indicate who was born of someone, but who was alike in behavior. And Jesus calls him “«Bar-Jonah! »”. Jonah is the only prophet in the Old Testament that had done the exact opposite of that which the Lord had commanded him. In fact the Lord had said to him: “Jonah, go to Nineveh and preach the conversion otherwise I will destroy it” and Jonah did the contrary.

Instead of going towards the east, he boarded a boat and went west. Then finally Jonah was converted. Therefore in this son of Jonah, Jesus sees the image of Peter: he will always do the contrary of what Jesus will ask him to do, but then finally he will be converted.

“«For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. »” Here Peter is blessed because he is of a pure heart and can see God, “And I tell you, «you are Peter,..»”, the Greek word used by the evangelist is “Petros”, meaning brick, stone, which is used to build, “«.. and on this rock..»” the evangelist uses the Greek word “Petra” to indicate rocks that are good for constructing. It is the same word that Jesus chose, in chapter 7, for the house constructed on rocks.

“So, Jesus says to Simon: “You are a brick. On this rock”, and the rock is Jesus, “«I will build my church»”. The Greek word *ecclesia* has nothing sacred about it, but is a profane word that indicates the meeting, the assembly of those that have been summoned. Therefore Jesus has not come to construct a new synagogue, but a new reality that does not have a religious undercurrent, and for this he uses this lay word.

“«...and the gates.. »”; the gates of a city indicated its strength and power. “«..of hell..»” the kingdom of the dead. Take note that the scene took place near one of the caves thought to be the entrance to the kingdom of the dead. “«...shall not prevail against it »”.

When a community is constructed on Jesus, the son of the living God, it communicates life; the negative force, the force of the dead, will have no power.

“«..I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, »”. To give the keys to someone meant the responsibility of security of those that were inside. We have said at other times that the kingdom of heaven in the Matthew’s Gospel does not mean the kingdom of heaven, but the kingdom of God. Therefore Jesus did not give the keys to Peter of the hereafter, he was not appointed to open or to

close, but to be responsible of those that are inside this kingdom, that is the alternative society that Jesus had come to propose.

*“« ..whatever you bind on earth»”, here the evangelist uses rabbinical language, that means to declare if a doctrine is authenticity or not , “«..shall be bound in heaven, » ”that is in God, “«..and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. »”. What Jesus says now to Peter, later in chapter 18, he will say to all the disciples.*

At the end of this Gospel, Jesus invites his disciples to go and teach. In the teachings of Jesus, is a message that communicates life, there is the divine approval from heaven. But, here is a surprise *“he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.”*

When Jesus “orders” it means that there is resistance. In Peter’s reply there was a positive part in fact he had recognized Jesus as the son of God, who communicates life, the living God, but what is the negative part? The people had said that you are the Christ, that is the Messiah expected by tradition. So Jesus says:” this you must say to on one”, because he is not the Messiah expected by tradition.

Jesus is Christ, he is the Messiah, but in a completely different form. He does not use power, but love; he does not command, but serves. And this will cause a clash with Simon. That which was defined “rock” for construction, will become a rock of scandal.