

Tu Es Petrus

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Saint Paul's, Batesville
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Proper 16, Year A
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+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of
the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Of the several schools I've attended over the
years, the University of St. Andrews holds a
special place in my heart, even though I was only
there for a semester. This is because St. Andrews,
unlike many universities here or in Great Britain,
was a place where religion was taken very seriously.

Now, while the students and faculty of my
college there took religion very seriously, none of
us took himself very seriously, and this deadly
combination led one Friday evening to a biblically-
themed costume party. It had not occurred to the
organizers of this fete that there weren't that
many biblical characters whose identity would be
immediately obvious by means of a costume, so there

were no less than 3 Satans, 4 Jesuses, and a half-dozen Virgin Marys. Thus, I was proud of my ingenuity in choosing to go as the only St. Peter that evening. The costume consisted of a hastily constructed cope and miter (the cape and pointed hat associated with the office of bishop), a set of keys, and a scroll which read "tu es petrus, et super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam," Latin for "you are Peter, and upon this rock I shall build my Church." I should have known that my Scottish Presbyterian classmates would find this image a bit disconcerting. After a few nervous jokes about what they construed as popery, I was (perhaps insincerely) congratulated for being clever, and we got on with the games planned for the evening. To my disappointment, one of the Virgin Marys won the costume prize.

I tell this story not to brag about clever costume construction or to criticize my fellows for lacking a sense of humor. Rather, I mean to point

out how contentious the interpretation of Jesus' statement in today's Gospel reading still is. What precisely Jesus means by "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" is important, but the answer Christians give still differs.

But, let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let's begin by looking closely at the passage in question, and particularly at Peter. Up to this point, Peter seems to specialize in getting things wrong. Now, to be fair, Peter's first appearance in the Gospel shows him getting things profoundly right. He shows up first in the fourth chapter of Matthew, when Jesus, as yet a stranger, calls out to Peter on his fishing boat and bids him "follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Peter's response is that of faith. He throws down his net, and obeys the call to become a fisher of men.

Despite this initial demonstration of faith and understanding, Peter (like the rest of the disciples) cannot help but to be lacking in both

through much of the rest of the Gospel. You will remember from a couple of weeks ago, Peter's mostly failed attempt to walk on water, and Jesus' subsequent assessment that Peter was "of little faith."

The gospels are peppered with instances of Peter misunderstanding Jesus' identity and mission, but in today's reading, Peter finally gets it right. "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks his disciples, and Peter answers "you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

It is to this instance of profound faith and insight that Jesus responds "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church." So, what does that mean? We know that Peter was reckoned a leader of the apostles during his life. Perhaps this leadership is all Jesus implied. Perhaps, on the other hand, the Roman Catholic view is correct. This is the view that my costume led my fellows to assume I affirmed. Perhaps Peter, as first bishop

of Rome, and his successors hold a divinely appointed role as the ultimate authority within the Church on earth. This is not my own view, at least not entirely, but it's a coherent argument with a long history and many proponents from the Patristic era up through today. The view and its proponents must be respected. And perhaps they're right.

There is a third possibility, as well. Maybe, it's not Peter as an individual or Peter as representative of a series of popes on which Christ means to build His Church. Perhaps the rock to which Jesus refers is not Peter at all, but Peter's confession. Perhaps the rock upon which Christ has built His Church, against which (he says) the gates of Hades cannot prevail, is the declaration itself: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." The ambiguity of the statement in this instance allows for such an interpretation. It is "you are Peter, and upon *this* rock I will build my church." It is not "you are Peter, and upon *you* I will build

my Church". So, there are some who hold this third view, and we might find it compelling.

But this interpretation has its problems. First, Jesus is clearly engaging in a play on words here, because Peter's name actually means "rock". This would lend credence to the view that the Church was to be built upon Peter himself, not upon his confession. Secondly, in the next verse Jesus grants the "keys to the kingdom" and the authority to "bind" and "loose" to Peter. These are all technical terms in a sermon which has already become too technical, so suffice it to say, Peter is given real, significant authority here.

In the end, the question of precisely what Peter's authority is and how and to whom to it is passed is a question for theological debate at a higher level than most of us are qualified to engage in. *I* could opine, but that's all I'd be able to give, ultimately: an opinion. The real interesting thing for our purposes, though, is that

Jesus gives Peter great authority (whatever the specifics of that authority are), and he grants this authority despite the fact that Peter has missed the mark so many times and will miss the mark again. Later in this same chapter in Matthew, in what will be next week's Gospel reading, Peter doesn't get it when Jesus explains that he has to die on the cross. Indeed, Peter's refusal to accept it leads Jesus to rebuke and literally demonize him by saying, "get behind me, Satan!" This is the same Peter who will deny his Lord on the eve of his crucifixion. Yet, he is also the Peter who would preach before the nations in Jerusalem. This is the same Peter who inaugurates the mission to the Gentiles which Paul would take up after him. This is the same Peter who would be bishop of Rome and would himself be crucified for the faith.

I think the message here for us, is that God can make us saints despite ourselves. He doesn't give up on us as lost causes because we slip on the

path or "backslide" as some evangelical preachers put it. Peter is, in a sense, a poster boy for the ordinary Christian, the Christian occasionally beset by fears and doubts and sins, but who ultimately succeeds in living a life of heroic faith.

Some of us need to look to Paul, who lived what was in many ways a desolate life before he became a Christian, and then began a righteous life when Jesus met him on the road to Damascus. But, perhaps, even more of us need to look to Peter, who got in early on the Christianity thing, messed up a lot along the way, but through God's grace was given authority to be a leader in the Church, and ultimately to become a champion of the faith.

Peter teaches us our need for continual conversion. We need to have our hearts open, to follow Christ when he beckons us out of our fishing boats or factories or cubicles and promises to lead us we know not where. We need to have our eyes open

to see the risen Lord when he asks us, "who do you say that I am?" and we need the faith to respond "you are the Christ, the Son of the living God." We need to be ready, like Peter, to welcome Jesus into our lives every day, to acknowledge where we have misunderstood or denied him, and to ask for the strength to follow His will. It's just that simple, but don't we have a terribly hard time doing it. That's why I said we need continual conversion. Conversion is not just a matter of turning our lives around 180 degrees once in our life. Conversion is a matter of daily course corrections, of prayerful discernment of where we are going, where we are going wrong, and where God means for us to go.

Our failure to understand and follow is not to be excused, it is daily to be corrected. But neither is it to be dwelt upon. God has work for us to do, and He gives us the gifts we need to do that work. Because of Peter's good confession, Jesus

bestowed a gift of great authority on him. In response to our own good confessions, to our own acknowledgement that Jesus is Lord and God, the Spirit will continue to give us the gifts to do His work; as St. Paul writes in today's epistle: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

And like Blessed Peter, we must remember that the Spirit's gifts are not to be hoarded. Rather, they are to be used in service to the Gospel, for the advancement of God's purposes and His Kingdom in a world yearning for the Good News. When we succeed in doing that, our petty doubts and fears will (like Peter's) be dwarfed by the good fruits which Christ's Spirit bears in and through us.

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.