

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time  
August 21, 2011

We meet the figure of Peter this month in three of the four Sunday Gospels from St. Matthew: Peter walking on water, Peter proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah and being called the rock and keeper of the keys, and Peter being sharply rebuked for resisting Jesus' prediction of his coming suffering and death (next week).

Most of us know the other stories about Simon Peter – his call to leave his fishing boat to become Jesus' trusted disciple; the story of the miraculous catch of fish; the healing of his mother-in-law; his presence with James and John at the Transfiguration; at the Last Supper, his reluctance to let Jesus wash his feet; his boast that he would never deny Jesus, then his triple denial; his key role as witness to the Resurrection, including his poignant reconciliation and commission by Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias.

Add to these Gospel accounts the stories in the Acts of the Apostles about Peter's preaching after Pentecost, his vision of birds and animals being lowered from heaven to show that everything was now acceptable to eat, his quarrel with Paul over whether gentile converts had to keep the Mosaic Law. Finally, there are the stories not in the Bible but common to tradition, such as that Peter traveled to Rome and was martyred there. His remains in fact have been uncovered beneath the papal altar in St. Peter's Basilica.

Much is made of his two names, Simon ("reed"), his birth name, and Peter ("rock"), the name given to him by Jesus in the famous scene at Caesarea Philippi. It is here, in today's Gospel, where perhaps the most problematic pun in all of history was uttered by Jesus. He describes Peter's role as the "rock" on which the church would be built. Perhaps the continued use of "Simon Peter" best describes the paradoxical figure who continued to exhibit both strength and weakness throughout his life as recorded in the New Testament.

Apostolic succession and the primacy of the bishop of Rome, matters of authority and orthodoxy are critical, of course, but it is the stories about this complex, impetuous and faltering hero that have had the deeper claim on the Christian imagination over the centuries. As a primary witness to Jesus and model for the

kind of leadership Jesus wanted for his followers, Simon Peter is a window into the mind of Christ and the meaning of the Gospel.

The face of Jesus had been imprinted on Simon Peter's face. Their last searing encounter on the beach at the Sea of Tiberias had been his moment of healing and his commissioning as an apostle. After all he had done to destroy his first call, the night his courage had failed, his sorrow to the point of despair – despite all this, Jesus had come back from the dead to find him and offer him another chance.

His very failure somehow became his credential as foremost preacher of God's limitless mercy. What had broken him open to the core had made room for an equal measure of grace. His tears had been a baptism deep enough to test the foundation of faith for the church itself. From stumbling block to cornerstone, Simon Peter had lived the Gospel he would announce to others. This was why Jesus had appointed him leader.

Religious leadership of the people of God is primarily a sacred trust. Both ancient Israel and early Christianity insisted on this. This is not primarily because of the leadership itself, but because the people are a sacred people. The biblical tradition maintains that good religious leaders are really servants of the people. They take their positions and responsibilities seriously, because the people of God deserve the best that they have to offer. Would future church leaders lord it over them, as Jesus had warned his disciples to avoid at all cost? Power is the subtlest yet greatest threat to the Gospel. "I have come to serve, not to be served. If you want to lead, be the servant of all."

Realization of this mystery caused Paul to break out into the praise we hear in the reading from Romans. He marvels at the unsearchable ways of God, who time and again has stepped into our lives with saving grace. It is God who initiates renewal, and it is God who calls some to lead God's people in that renewal. Leadership is certainly a sacred trust, not to be taken lightly, either by those who lead or by those who are led.

Paul A. Magnano  
Pastor