



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church.

Readings: Isaiah 22:19-23, Ps 137, Romans 11: 33-36, Matthew 16:13-20

Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ at Caesarea Philippi is the key text for the seniority, I put it no higher, of the Petrine office.

We know, as we hear this great text on the Feasts and in Ordinary time, that Peter was not the most theological of the brethren. That would be John. Peter was not the greatest of the Missionaries. His journeys did not equal some of the less noted Apostles, like Thomas to India. He was not the most articulate of communicators with the early Church, nor the one who set the patterns for mission and ministry in the millennia to come. That would be Paul. He is not the bravest or the most faithful or the apostolic band. He would be some way down the list. But he is the one Jesus chose at this historic moment and forever through his successors. To the human eye this seems pretty arbitrary and, to the later breakaways of the Reformation, utterly unacceptable. But he is what he is because that is what Christ has called him to be.

When we think about Peter, as Catholics, we think Papacy. And when we talk Papacy to non Catholics, they think we are a pretty rum lot. They think that we believe that The Pope is never wrong. If he got out of bed one

Sunday and announced that it was Tuesday then Catholics would instantly readjust their diaries. This is, of course, nonsense. The Pope is as capable of making mistakes as the next man. His infallibility is strictly limited to statements upholding the doctrine of the Faith – and that in very limited circumstances. Like Peter himself, any Pope is capable of human error and, like the rest of us, is a sinner.

Indeed, trawling through the history of the Papacy can be an unedifying task in some periods. There have been, thank God, great Saints who have enriched the Calendar. There have also been some pretty unspectacular chaps who have, as it were, just ‘kept the show on the road’. No mean feat in itself in some periods of history. And there have been the out and out ‘stinkers’ – men whose immorality has disgraced the office and calling of the Servant of the Servants of God. The thing that all these men have in common, apart from the office, is that not one of them tried to change the teaching of the Faith. However, at the Reformation, when large parts of Europe rejected the Papacy and the Universal Church, a terrible but utterly predictable thing began to happen. Freed from the doctrinal ‘tyranny’ of the Magisterium – the teaching authority of the Church – the schismatics continued to splinter and divide into a hundred thousand pieces as Protestantism followed the simple logic that, once you abolish the Pope, every man becomes a Pope in his own front room. Untied from the rock of Peter, each believer began to concoct his own ‘brand’ of Christianity and claim personal authority for it. Some ministers found themselves snared in the relativist net – ‘your truth and my truth’ – while others changed ‘their truth’ at any convenient moment in the comings and goings of their humanly constructed institution – a sort of terminal Vicar of Bray syndrome. This was all possible via the hijacking of the Unified Faith of the One Church

by those whose arrogance and pride sought, not to correct error but rather to propagate it in their own favour.

The glory of the Papacy has been its coherence and consistency. It understands that its *raison d'être*, its reason for existence, is to keep the Apostolic Faith undiminished and, by the tradition, hand it on unsullied, unaltered and undiminished to the next generation of the Faithful. The Papacy is the Petrine Rock that cannot move.

Individual Popes make errors – Cardinal Ratzinger allegedly chastised his boss, Pope St John Paul II for publicly kissing the Koran. It was intended as a sign of respect for the other monotheists of Islam. It was regarded by many who, for many centuries had struggled under the oppression of this particular cultus Jew and Christian alike had suffered, as a deep betrayal of the Petrine Office. To kiss a book with so much Christian blood on it and pay respects to a theology which specifically denies Christ was seen as a betrayal of the Gospel.

Similarly, when Peter tried to retreat from the open table/ altar of worship and spiritual feeding, Paul chastises him. The long end of two tables/two altars is schism, ruinous division. To have a Jewish table and a gentile table is suggest that the promise to Abraham has, sadly, not been fulfilled.

Convinced by coherence of Paul's argument, Peter relents. Without that intervention and repentance, there would be no universal church, just a gaggle of ecclesiastical huts all defending their increasingly unfathomable origins and authority.

So Peter, then, is essential. But he is neither impeccable nor infallible in his daily round. His virtue and value is not in his personality or his personal preferences, marvellous though they may be, but in his strict adherence to the task of defending the Apostolic Faith and handing it on.

We love him, whoever he is. We pray for him wherever we are. But we never indulge in that mindless Popeolatry which, in the post- conciliar age of the Papal Rock Star, does no service to the Gospel and confuses the man with the message and the infallibility of the office with the deep fallibility of every occupant since and including Peter. Only thus can we avoid failing to minister to the Servant of the Servants of God and assisting him in his role as supreme pontiff – bridge builder and defender of the Faith.