

# 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time

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Preached August 27, 2017; St. Peter Catholic Church, The Dalles, Oregon

Has anyone ever asked you if you have been ‘saved’? Has anyone ever asked you if you have accepted Jesus Christ as your ‘personal savior’?

Perhaps the most common, well-known view of Christianity in this country today is built around ‘accepting Jesus Christ as your personal savior.’ This seems to be widely regarded as the key ingredient of Bible-based Christianity. Of course the claim of purely ‘Bible-based’ Christianity is a bit deceptive; every version of Christianity involves a tradition of interpretation. The question is, what tradition is someone going to follow?

In any case, this view of Christianity takes one passage from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans as perhaps the most important passage in the entire Bible: *If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.* (Rm 10:9)

While the precise interpretations might vary and while no one will seriously reduce accepting Jesus as personal savior to a mere verbal formula, it all comes down to a single, personal conscious act, that might be done in the privacy of your room, without any witnesses other than God; when that essentially private act is accomplished you are saved, you will go to heaven, and you can be absolutely sure that you will go to heaven. Once a person makes his act of faith, he is one of the saved, a complete Christian. Everything else is just God working his will in your life and spreading the good news to others.

This leads to a purely individualistic and subjective understanding of Christianity in which the Church comes in only as an afterthought. On this view, there is actually no objective measure of person’s Christian faith outside of his personal relation to Jesus, his Savior. Those who are saved can come together in the Church and rejoice together and make use of the Church to spread the good news, but strictly speaking the Church is not necessary.

On this view of Christianity there is hardly any need to worry about the words of St. Paul, *Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.* (Ph 2:12) What need to work out your salvation when you are already saved?

So now let’s take a look at today’s Gospel in which the word ‘salvation’ does not appear, except that the very name “Jesus” means “Savior”, but where the *keys of the kingdom of heaven* are mentioned. One might reasonably think it impossible to enter into the kingdom of heaven and so be truly and definitively saved without the help of those keys!

Let's set before our eyes the scene of Peter standing before Jesus. Jesus is looking at Peter, but Peter is not alone, he is standing there with the other Apostles. There are twelve of them, just as there were twelve sons of Jacob, patriarchs of the people of God, Israel. No doubt they had spent much time talking among themselves about their experience with Jesus. Indeed, the Gospel's relate the question that had already occurred to them, *What sort of man is this, whom even the winds and sea obey?* (Mt 8:27) Now Jesus says to all of them, *Who do you say that I am?* That is indeed the key question that each one must answer. Jesus' question, together with the answer, lies also at the basis of St. Paul's statement: *If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*

It is Jesus himself who asks the question and not some book. That is true even today, though the book can help us come into the presence of Jesus, hear the question, and discover the answer. Indeed, we could say that Jesus did not ask the question only once, long ago to the Apostles; he puts the question to each one of us, continually and we must continually answer the question anew.

According to the interpretation of the Bible given by the Sacred Tradition of the Catholic Church, believing and confessing the name of the Lord Jesus is not a one time act, but a continual process, a life's journey, a pilgrimage. It must be that way because until we see Jesus face-to-face in the heavenly kingdom we will always need to rediscover the answer and come to an ever deeper knowledge and understanding of the inexhaustible reality of Jesus Christ.

Jesus puts the question to the Apostles and Peter answers on behalf of all of them, *You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.* Jesus reveals to Peter that his answer did not come from himself, but from God the Father. Yet, clearly Peter was unaware of this revelation when he uttered the words; Jesus had to make it known to him.

We could imagine that when Jesus asked the question a sort of 'light' turned on inside of Peter, he had a sort of 'aha' moment. We know what that is like, but we do not think that all of our 'aha' moments are direct revelations from God; indeed, sometimes those 'lights' that go on in us might be false lights, willow-wisps. In this case, Jesus confirms that the light that turned on inside of Peter was not just any light, but perhaps the most important 'light' ever to turn on inside a human being in the whole course of history. Peter believed in his heart and confessed with his lips, but he was not alone, the other Apostles were there with him, believing the same thing.

The light that turned on inside of Peter, the light that came from the heavenly Father, was of such importance that Jesus adds, *You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church.* Peter was not the name he received at birth; from birth he was Simon, son of Jonah. Peter, meaning 'Rock', was the name that Jesus gave him and now the reason for that name is made known.

A rock is something very solid, visible, concrete, and objective. A rock is something we can see and grab onto. A rock is a solid foundation for a construction project.

Now like all of Scripture this passage is filled with an immense wealth of meaning, but one important thing we can draw forth from it is that the faith of Peter, Peter's public profession of faith, is the objective measure of the faith of the whole Church, the faith of the Christian. Each one must believe in his heart and confess with his lips, but that is not enough, that belief and confession must be built into the whole structure of the Church, it must be measured and verified by the unshakeable faith of Peter. We can be sure of our faith only so long as we can verify that it conforms to the faith of Peter, only so long as it is built upon the rock of the Church. For each one of us the act of faith is a personal and intimate response to Jesus Christ, but the faith of the Church precedes, nourishes, supports, and confirms our personal act of faith, moving it out of the realm of the purely subjective into the rock solid world of objectivity.

That is also why Peter receives the keys of the kingdom. Faith is the foundation for the whole Christian life, which is not a life lived in isolation, but a life lived in the people of God, in the sacred society that is the Church. So it is that Peter, whose faith measures the faith of Church is also given the authority to regulate the life of faith as it is lived out in the Church. That is not an office that ended with the death of Peter but has continued in his successors, the Popes, worthy and unworthy, saints and sinners, and continues today in Pope Francis. It belongs to Peter and his successors to guide the faith and life of the people of God with an authority that comes from Christ himself.

Now I said that Peter's profession of faith was *perhaps* the most important 'light' that was ever turned on inside a human being. Peter's faith is the standard that verifies and confirms our faith, that frees us from the prison of our own minds, that places us in the world of faith as into a reality that is every bit as objective as the things we see and hear every day.

I said 'perhaps' because there is a more important act of faith that lies hidden behind Peter's, that in a hidden way nourished and supported even Peter's faith.

Some thirty years before Peter's profession of faith, a young virgin listened to the message of an angel and responded in faith, saying, *Behold, the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to your word.* (Lk 1:38) Through her faith, Mary conceived and gave birth to Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Together with her cousin Elizabeth, moved by the Holy Spirit, we proclaim Mary as blessed because of her faith (cf. Lk 45); this we recall every time we say, *Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.*

The faith of Mary is not the objective, public standard by which all faith is measured and to which all faith must be conformed, but it is something greater, it is the faith of the Mother, who gives life and nourishment to every act of faith, who leads us, by her prayers, to believe in her Son, Jesus Christ and to live according to that faith.