

Homily Notes  
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**Peter and The Rock**

There is ample evidence in the New Testament that Peter was first in authority among the apostles. Whenever they were named, Peter headed the list (Matt. 10:1-4, Mark 3:16-19, Luke 6:14-16, Acts 1:13); sometimes the apostles were referred to as "Peter and those who were with him" (Luke 9:32). Peter was the one who generally spoke for the apostles (Matt. 18:21, Mark 8:29, Luke 12:41, John 6:68-69), and he figured in many of the most dramatic scenes (Matt. 14:28-32, Matt. 17:24-27, Mark 10:23-28).

On Pentecost it was Peter who first preached to the crowds (Acts 2:14-40), and he worked the first healing in the Church age (Acts 3:6-7). It is Peter's faith that will strengthen his brethren (Luke 22:32) and Peter is given Christ's flock to shepherd (John 21:17). An angel was sent to announce the resurrection to Peter (Mark 16:7), and the risen Christ first appeared to Peter (Luke 24:34). He headed the meeting that elected Matthias to replace Judas (Acts 1:13-26), and he received the first converts (Acts 2:41). He inflicted the first punishment (Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11), and excommunicated the first heretic (Simon tried to buy Holy Spirit in Acts 8:18-23). He led the first council in Jerusalem (Acts 15), and announced the first dogmatic decision (Acts 15:7-11). It was to Peter that the revelation came that Gentiles were to be baptized and accepted as Christians (Acts 10:46-48).

When he first saw Simon, "Jesus looked at him, and said, 'So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas (which means Peter)'" (John 1:42). The word Cephas is merely the transliteration of the Aramaic Kepha into Greek. Later, after Peter and the other disciples had been with Christ for some time, they went to Caesarea Philippi, where Peter made his profession of faith: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). Jesus told him that this truth was specially revealed to him, and then he solemnly reiterated: "And I tell you, you are Peter" (Matt. 16:18). To this was added the promise that the Church would be founded, in some way, on Peter (Matt. 16:18).

Then two important things were told the apostle. "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19). Here Peter was singled out for the authority that provides for the forgiveness of sins and the making of disciplinary rules. Later the apostles as a whole would be given similar power [Matt. 18:18], but here Peter received it in a special sense.

Peter alone was promised something else also: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 16:19). In ancient times, keys were the hallmark of authority. A walled city might have one great gate; and that gate had one great lock, worked by one great key. To be given the key to the city—an honor that exists even today, though its import is lost—meant to be given free access to and authority over the city. The city to which Peter was given the keys was the heavenly city itself. This symbolism for authority is used elsewhere in the Bible (Is. 22:22, Rev. 1:18).

Finally, after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples and asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" (John 21:15-17). In repentance for his threefold denial, Peter gave a threefold affirmation of love. Then Christ, the Good Shepherd (John 10:11, 14), gave Peter the authority he earlier had promised: "Feed my sheep" (John 21:17). This specifically included the other apostles, since Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" (John 21:15), the word "these" referring to the other apostles who were present (John 21:2). Thus was completed the prediction made just before Jesus and his followers went for the last time to the Mount of Olives.

Immediately before his denials were predicted, Peter was told, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again [after the denials], strengthen your brethren" (Luke 22:31-32). It was Peter who Christ prayed would have faith that would not fail and that would be a guide for the others; and his prayer, being perfectly efficacious, was sure to be fulfilled.

Opponents of the Catholic interpretation of Matthew 16:18 sometimes argue that in the Greek text the name of the apostle is Petros, while "rock" is rendered as *petra*. They claim that the former refers to a small stone, while the latter refers to a massive rock; so, if Peter was meant to be the massive rock, why isn't his name *Petra*?

Note that Christ did not speak to the disciples in Greek. He spoke Aramaic, the common language of Palestine at that time. In that language the word for rock is *kepha*, which is what Jesus called him in everyday speech (note that in John 1:42 he was told, "You will be called Cephass"). What Jesus said in Matthew 16:18 was: "You are *Kepha*, and upon this *kepha* I will build my Church."

When Matthew's Gospel was translated from the original Aramaic to Greek, there arose a problem which did not confront the evangelist when he first composed his account of Christ's life. In Aramaic the word *kepha* has the same ending whether it refers to a rock or is used as a man's name. In Greek, though, the word for rock, *petra*, is feminine in gender. The translator could use it for the second appearance of *kepha* in the sentence, but not for the first because it would be inappropriate to give a man a feminine name. So he put a masculine ending on it, and hence Peter became *Petros*.

Furthermore, the premise of the argument against Peter being the rock is simply false. In first century Greek the words *petros* and *petra* were synonyms. They had previously possessed the meanings of "small stone" and "large rock" in some early Greek poetry, but by the first century this distinction was gone, as Protestant Bible scholars admit (see D. A. Carson's remarks on this passage in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Books]).

