Christ the King—St. Stephen
Scripture Reflection
21st Sunday of Ordinary Time
2026—A Cycle



What do I see?

If I closely study Pietro Perugino's 1481-1482 painting of St. Peter receiving a symbolic key from Jesus, I'll notice that the artist actually shows a set of *two* keys. Jesus hands Peter one key pointing skyward to the kingdom of heaven... and another pointing downward to signify his ministry of saving souls in this world.

Why did Jesus choose the tempestuous Peter as the leader of the apostles?
Where would I place <u>myself</u> in this painting? Why there?

Opening Prayer

Peter, holy apostle,
you are the "rock" upon which Jesus built his Church.
Grant me I pray:
lively faith… firm hope… burning love,
patience in adversity… humility in prosperity…
recollection in prayer… purity of heart…
a right intention in all my works…
constancy in my resolutions…
resignation to the will of God…
perseverance in grace to my death.
Help me to be worthy to appear...
before the Eternal Shepherd of souls...
who lives and reigns with the Father...

and the Holy Spirit... forever.
Amen.

Source: Prayers to Our Saints

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 22: 19-23 "Eliakam... will be a father-leader to Jerusalem and the government of Judah."

Psalm 138: 1-3, 6-8 "I kneel in worship facing your holy temple and say it again: 'Thank you!'"

Romans 11: 33-36 "Have you ever come on anything quite like this extravagant generosity of God, this deep, deep wisdom?"

Matthew 16: 13-20 "When Jesus arrived in the villages of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'What are people saying about who the Son of Man is?'"

Introduction to the 21st Sunday of Ordinary Time

An underlying theme within this weekend's scripture readings is *divine love and preference for the poor*.

In the first reading from Isaiah, we read… "You will be deposed, strong man…." The person admonished here is Shebna, the palace steward. A steward held the responsible position of finance minister. In this case, Shebna had too grand an image of himself and treated others badly, thus his firing.

We now read these words of St. Paul in Romans 11: 33-36, "How deep are the riches, the wisdom and knowledge of God!" Week by week, over the past few months, we have witnessed Paul baring his most private self to Rome's Jewish and Roman converts, most of whom lived among the lower classes of society. He assured them they could indeed coexist despite their cultural differences and worship the Risen Christ in harmony as brothers and sisters in the Spirit.

Matthew wrote in 16: 13-20 that Jesus asked his apostles… "Who do *people* say the Son of Man is?" In other words, Jesus wanted his closest friends to share the scuttlebutt about him circulating among the Jewish people. Their replies varied: "Elijah," "John the Baptist," "Jeremiah," "one of the prophets." His second question contained a zinger: "But who do *you* say I am?" Peter (of course) jumped in first, "The Messiah, the Son of the living God." Then, Jesus surprised the Apostles, by designating Peter—the same one whose courage failed [last week] after briefly walking on water. Yet, Jesus chose him to carry the "keys" of spiritual leadership following the first Pentecost.

A Reading from the Book of Isaiah (22: 19-23)

[Around the 7th century BC/BCE, the Prophet Isaiah said,] "The Master, God-of-the-Angel-Armies, spoke, 'Go to this steward, Shebna, who is in charge of all the king's affairs, and tell him, "What's going on here? You're an outsider here and yet you act like you own the place, make a big, fancy tomb for yourself where everyone can see it, making sure everyone will think you're important. God is about to sack you, to throw you to the dogs. He'll grab you by the hair, swing you round and round dizzyingly, and then let you go, sailing through the air like a ball, until you're out of sight. Where you'll land, nobody knows. And there you'll die, and all the stuff you've collected heaped on your grave. You've disgraced your master's house! You're fired—and good riddance!"

"'On that day, I'll replace Shebna. I will call my servant Eliakim, son of Hilkiah. I'll dress him in your robe. I'll put your belt on him. I'll give him your authority. He'll be a father-leader to Jerusalem and the government of Judah. I'll give him the key of the Davidic heritage. He'll have the run of the place—open any door and keep it open, lock any door and keep it locked. I'll pound him like a nail into a solid wall. He'll secure the Davidic tradition. Everything will hang on him—not only the fate of Davidic descendants but also the detailed daily operations of the house, including cups and cutlery.'"

Personal Reflection

It's safe to say that most of us know little about Shebna, nor does he seem worthy of fanfare. He held power during the reign of King Hezekiah (715–687 BC/BCE). The Prophet Isaiah called him a crooked handler of the Jewish state's money. The prophet also cited Shebna for his abusive behavior and predicted his downfall.

— *How aware am I that God has handed me a "key" for leadership in my family, my faith community, my civic community? How am I currently engaged in some form of ministry?*

Psalm 138 (1-3, 6, 8)

A psalm of David in thanksgiving to a faithful God

Lord, your love is eternal; do not forsake the work of your hands.

Thank you! Everything in me says, "Thank you!"
Angels listen as I sing my thanks.
I kneel in worship facing your holy temple
and say it again, "Thank you!"
Thank you for your love,
thank you for your faithfulness.
Most holy is your name,
most holy is your Word.
The moment I called out, you stepped in;

you made my life large with strength.
Lord, your love is eternal; do not forsake the work of your hands.

And here's why: God, high above, sees far below;
no matter the distance, he knows everything about us.
When I walk into the thick of trouble,
keep me alive in the angry turmoil.
With one hand strike my foes,
With your other hand save me.
Finish what you started in me, God.
Your love is eternal—don't quit on me now.
Lord, your love is eternal; do not forsake the work of your hands.

Personal Reflection

In Psalm 138, we hear a processional chant, "*Lord, your love is eternal; don't quit on me now.*" In this psalm of thanksgiving to a faithful God, David acknowledges Yahweh as a reliable promise-keeper.

By contrast, religious believers, then and now, weave in and out of promises kept and promises violated. Our hope is that, as we grow in grace, our response will also grow deeper in fidelity, with fewer instances of infidelity.

There is one seeming inconsistency in this psalm, namely, in its reference to the "holy temple." David did not build the Temple. His son King Solomon did. Scholars think David might have used the word "temple" when speaking of the Holy of Holies that held the sacred scrolls given to Moses.

— *What signs in my everyday life indicate that I am on a path of true and unshakable faith? If I have trouble claiming that kind of fidelity, what change(s) do I need to make?*

From St. Paul's Letter to the Romans (11: 33-36)

[Paul wrote,] "Have you ever come on anything quite like this extravagant generosity of God, this deep, deep wisdom? It's way over our heads. We'll never figure it out."

[Then Paul waxed poetic...]

"Is there *anyone* around who can explain God?
Anyone smart enough to tell him what to do?
Anyone who has done him such a huge favor
that God has to ask his advice?
Everything comes from God.
Everything happens through him.
Everything ends up in him.
Always glory! Always praise!
Yes. Yes. Yes!"

Personal Reflection

In this passage, Paul threw his hands in the air and admitted that his knowledge and wisdom paled before the unfathomable mystery of the nature and ways of God. All he knew when he wrote this passage was how Jesus spoke to him… and saved him, mostly from his own ego and self-esteem. Paul, after all his teaching, proclaim-Ing, and explaining, seems here to throw up his hands and admit (poetically) to the Roman Christians he has yet to meet in person, "Hey folks, what do I know? In the end it's *all* mystery!"

That's exactly what faith is, believing without seeing. And yes, it's *all* mystery.

Paul did his human best to, as the old saying goes, "Unscrew the inscrutable."
— *Am I okay with mystery as the core of my faith? Or do I need proof that what I hold dear is true?*

The Gospel According to Matthew (16: 13-20)

"When Jesus arrived in the villages of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'What are people saying about who the Son of Man is?'

"They replied, 'Some think he is John the Baptizer, some say Elijah, some Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets.'

"He pressed them, 'And how about you? Who do you say I am?'

"Simon Peter said, 'You're the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

"Jesus came back, 'God bless you, Simon, son of Jonah! You didn't get that answer out of books or from teachers. My Father in heaven, God himself, let you in on this secret of who I really am. And now I'm going to tell you who... *you...* really are. You are Peter... a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out.

"'And that's not all. You will have complete and free access to God's kingdom, keys to open any and every door, no more barriers between heaven and earth, earth and heaven. A yes on earth is yes in heaven. A no on earth is no in heaven.'

"He swore the disciples to secrecy. He made them promise they would tell no one that he was the Messiah."

Personal Reflection

Caesarea Philippi lay twenty-five miles north of the Sea of Galilee. Scholars tell us this was the farthest point north of Jerusalem that Jesus took his disciples. On this particular occasion, he wanted to hear "the word on the streets" from his own apostles. What did people think about him? When it came to Peter, he didn't hesitate to "jump in," as he had into the Sea of Galilee (19th Sunday of Ordinary Time). Jesus then declared Peter—with all his personal flaws—as the head of the apostles and bestowed on him "the keys" to heaven and earth. Why Peter? Probably because of his broad personality, a mix of boldness, impulsiveness, loyalty, and humility, shaped by his earthy beginnings as a fisherman and his gradual spiritual transformation through an evolving commitment to Jesus.

Jesus gave Simon a new name, Peter (with the nickname "Rocky").
— *Considering Simon's personality, how did his new name fit him? By what name does Jesus address me? Name it here: _____.*

For Inspirational Watching, Listening, and Reading

Watch
"St. Peter," from the video series "Who Cares About The Saints?" by Fr. James Martin, S.J. (Jesuit)... 8 min.

Listen
"Tu Es Petrus" ("You are Peter") by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525-1594)
Typically (but not only), this liturgical hymn is sung as a pope enters St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The composer, referred to by most as Palestrina, was a contemporary of Renaissance painters Michelangelo, Rafael, and Pietro Perugino (refer again to the painting at the top of this reflection).
English lyrics:
"You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound also in heaven; and whatever you release on earth will be released also in heaven."

"Who has known?" by John Foley S.J., inspired by this weekend's Psalm 138.

Read
Paul by N.T. Wright
An intimate look at Paul's life by a renowned Scripture scholar and Bishop in the Church of England. [*I've read this book and given it my highest rating*.—AJG]

Preview of Next Weekend's Scriptures

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Jeremiah 20: 7-9 "You pushed me into this, God, and I let you do it. You were too much for me."
Psalm 63: 2-6, 8-9 "In your generous love I am really living at last!"
Romans 12: 1-2 "Take your everyday, ordinary life... and place it before God as an offering."
Matthew 16: 21-27 "Jesus made it clear to his disciples that it was now necessary for him to go to Jerusalem... be killed, and then on the third day be raised up alive."

Closing Prayer

(edited, abridged, and adapted for use here)

Prayer to Saint Paul the Apostle

Saint Paul,
after persecuting the Church...
you became a zealous apostle.
With joy, you endured prison… scourgings…
stoning… shipwreck… and persecution.
Grant me the grace to bring faith to others...
and to accept any trials that come my way.
Inspire me by your life and letters.
After I finish my course in life...
may I join you in praising God in heaven...
for all eternity.
Amen.

Source: "The Best Catholic"

Unless otherwise indicated, the Sunday readings are from *The Message* Bible
translated by Rev. Dr. Eugene H. Peterson (Catholic Edition)
Peterson's translation of the Bible is a highly interpretive paraphrase,
celebrated for its readability.
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