

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A  
Ezek 33:7-9  
Ps 95 *passim*  
Rom 13:8-10  
Mt 18:15-20

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The Gospels record only two times when Jesus made specific reference to the Church. Both instances are in the Gospel of Matthew. We proclaimed one of them today.

The other one was two weeks ago. You remember the passage: it started with Jesus asking his disciples what people were saying about him. Then he put the question to them directly: “Who do *you* say I am?” Simon blurts out, “You are the Christ, . . .” The Greek word St. Matthew used is *Christos*, which means Anointed One. The equivalent word in Hebrew is Messiah. So, Simon is declaring that Jesus is the one the People of Israel have been waiting for, he is one they’ve been dreaming about, he is the savior. And Jesus says, in effect, “Right you are, Simon! In fact, you don’t know how right you are. My Father has given you this flash of insight. And so, I’m giving you a new name. From now on you’ll be known as Peter,” which means rock. “And you will be the rock on which I will build my Church. And more than that, Simon Peter, I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. The keys give you power, and with the keys you will have authority,” what Jesus called the power to bind and to loose. In today’s Gospel Jesus extends the power to bind and loose to the whole community of disciples, to the Church.

Simon Peter was right: Jesus was the Messiah, the long-awaited savior who would deliver the world from its suffering and misery. But at that point Peter didn’t have a clue what that meant, not yet anyway. And so, that Gospel passage two Sundays ago ended on a strange note. Jesus ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. Not yet. Not until they will have witnessed the end of the story. You see, Jesus did not establish the Church in the years leading up to his death. It was only after his resurrection that the risen Lord Jesus founded his Church. And right before his ascension into glory he gave the Great Commission: “Go therefore and teach all nations and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

That’s when Jesus delivered on the promise he made to Peter, to give him the keys to the kingdom of heaven; by then he had given Peter and the rest of the apostles, under Peter, the power to bind and to loose. The followers of Jesus, starting with the apostles and the disciples and streaming all the way down to us, and beyond, . . . the followers of Jesus are joined together as Church. What joins them together is the body and blood of Christ; in receiving the body and blood of Jesus we become the flesh and blood of Jesus.

And as members of the Body of Christ, the Church, we must respect the authority of the Church. In today's Gospel Jesus even suggests that whatever personal claims we have against one another we should take to the Church for resolution, after we've exhausted our private remedies. Unfortunately, those who hold the power to bind and to loose have not always done the right thing. That's a fact of history. Just like when St. Peter denied knowing (much less following!) Jesus in the early hours of Good Friday, the successors of St. Peter and the successors of the apostles have made terrible mistakes and sometimes committed terrible crimes. And, as we all know, trust, once it's been betrayed, is very very difficult to reestablish.

But we know we must try. Why? Because Jesus has promised to stick with us, and Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit to protect the Church. History shows that the Holy Spirit has in fact protected the Church, even from the sins of its human leadership.

Those who wield the power to bind and loose are burdened with a terrible responsibility. The first reading, from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, shows just how terrible it is. There God appoints Ezekiel to serve as watchman, to stand guard over the house of Israel, to sound the alarm when the city is under attack. God warns Ezekiel that a watchman who fails to keep watch is worse than useless. A watchman who does not cry out when danger appears becomes responsible for the evil that befalls the city.

And our second reading, from St. Paul's letter to the Romans, reminds us all, all who are the flesh and blood of Jesus, that as we keep watch, as we stand guard, our motives must be grounded in love, because, as St. Paul says, "love is the fulfillment of the law."

500 years ago, a German monk named Martin Luther posted on the door of the local cathedral a list of 95 grievances, points on which he believed the Catholic Church had gone astray in its teachings and in its practices. That day in October 1517 is observed as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. In the years that followed, the split between Catholics and Protestants was anything but loving or peaceful or merciful. It was the cause of much suffering and bloodshed on both sides. Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century did the Catholic Church, through the bishops gathered in council with the Holy Father in Vatican City, embrace Protestants as our separated brothers and sisters in the faith. And now in this anniversary year Pope Francis has been reaching out to Protestants and taking part in religious services in observance of (not to say celebration of) the Reformation.

We have learned over the years that the Church is always in need of reform. And because of the words of Jesus we acknowledge that our Holy Father the pope holds the keys to the kingdom of heaven. We have confidence in the power of the keys and the power that the Holy Father and the bishops in union with him have to bind and to loose.