

22. February 2021

Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter
“You are the Christ”

Mt 16:13-19

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi he put this question to his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' 'But you,' he said, 'who do you say I am?' Then Simon Peter spoke up and said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, 'Simon son of Jonah, you are a blessed man! Because it was no human agency that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. So I now say to you: You are Peter and on this rock I will build my community. And the gates of the underworld can never overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of Heaven: whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

This is the decisive confession that Peter makes and is considered the mark of true faith. It is what many Jews have not yet recognised. Even those who prayed yesterday for the coming of the Messiah! Some of us have joined in this prayer and asked the Holy Spirit to enlighten them so that they may recognise the true Messiah and not run after a false one, as has already happened in the history of the Jews. Both the Messiah is one of their own according to the blood (*cf. Rom 9:5*), and the one who bears this wonderful testimony! The Lord names the key to the knowledge of his person: *“Simon son of Jonah, you are a blessed man! Because it was no human agency that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven.”*

Prayer to the Holy Spirit is all the more important, because it needs supernatural knowledge through God Himself. The people of that time felt that there was something special about Jesus, and in their pious sense they took him for John the Baptist, others some for Elijah and others for Jeremiah or one of the prophet. But pious sense and human reasoning are not enough for the decisive insight that changes everything. And that is good, because then we understand that faith is a gift from God. Surely some might then ask that if it is a gift, why does not everyone receive this. The answer would be: it is a gift for everyone! Who receives it and when is not at our disposal! But it is our mission, speaking with Peter in this confession, to ensure that through our prayer, our witness of word and life, people

learn of this immeasurable gift that our heavenly Father sent His only begotten Son as Messiah into this world (*cf. Jn 3:16*). Who could testify this better than the Holy Spirit, our divine Master and Friend. He is the witness (*cf. Rom 8:16*).

But it is not only many Jewish people who do not yet recognise the true Messiah! So many are still waiting for salvation, even though they may not realise it or have lost their way. They do not yet know the greatest gift of God, namely that He gave Himself to mankind!

This is where Peter, the rock on which the Church is built, must stand. He must clearly and unshakably hold to this confession, for all the promises which the Lord subsequently makes have the unambiguous confession of the Messiah as their prerequisite. If Peter were to waver to the left or to the right and no longer testify to the world that Jesus is the only Saviour and Messiah, and were not to turn from these paths, then both the powers of the underworld would have great access to the Church and his God-given authority would be weakened or even depart.

Let this be far off!

I recall here a passage from the “A Short Tale of the Anti-Christ”, by Vladimir Soloviev. When the Antichrist (he appears in the book as the emperor) had drawn many of the Christians from the different denominations to his side, a smaller grouping resisted him. This group included a starets (that is what spiritual teachers in Russia are called). He said to the emperor: *“Great ruler! For us, the most precious thing about Christianity is Christ Himself - He Himself, and everything that comes from Him; for we know that in Him the whole fullness of the Divinity dwells bodily. But also from you, Sovereign, we are ready to receive every good thing, as soon as we recognise in your bountiful hand the holy hand of Christ. And to your question what you can do for us, this is our clear answer: Confess now here before us Jesus Christ, the Son of God, appeared in the flesh, risen and coming again - confess Him, and full of love we will receive you as the true forerunner of His return in glory.”*

But the emperor did not confess and the false prophet who accompanied him killed the starets. Thereupon the Pope Peter, who was also one of the group who had not gone over to the Emperor's side, realised that it was the Antichrist and condemned him.

Here an essential aspect of Peter's ministry becomes visible: the public confession of the true Redeemer of mankind and the rejection of all powers that want to put themselves in the place of God.

This is very necessary today and one often misses the clear language of the Church to clearly name the anti-Christian developments and to reject them. But if this does not happen, the faithful become confused and miss this so important Petrine ministry.

Thank God, we can turn to the Holy Spirit, who is the first Witness of the Messiah and reminds us of all that He has said and done (*cf. Jn 14:26*). Then we will discover that there are still some in the hierarchy who do not allow themselves to be taken in by the spirit of the times and who call things by their names. The priests, together with their bishops, are also in this service of Peter. Let them be encouraged to assume their responsibility and fearlessly proclaim the Gospel and confess Jesus as the Messiah and only Saviour, with all that that entails! Should bishops up to the high hierarchy no longer speak and act so clearly and unambiguously and pursue a different course, this is no reason to do the same. On the contrary, then it is all the more important to support the Church and the Petrine ministry, because without clear confession the mission is lost!