

Thursday, Eighteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Matthew 16:13-23

In the gospel of today we see the two sides to Peter. Initially he shows great insight into Jesus, identifying him as the Son of the Living God. *'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'* he says. In response, Jesus gives Peter a significant leadership role in his growing community of disciples. Peter is to be the rock on which Jesus will build his church. Peter will have authority in the church, symbolized by the keys. The language of binding and loosening suggests this is primarily a teaching authority. He will have authority to declare which elements of Jesus' teaching are binding and which can be interpreted more loosely. There is no other person in the gospels to whom Jesus gives such a significant role. However, in the second part of the gospel, when this same Peter who is rock goes on to rebuke Jesus for speaking about his passion and death the situation drastically changes. In response, Jesus addresses Peter as Satan and as a scandal, a stumbling stone, and obstacle in his path: *'Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my path, because the way you think is not God's way but man's.'* Thus, there is a very big contrast between the first part of the Gospel and the second part. It is like Peter has deeply fallen from grace within such a short space of time. From Rock to stumbling stone! It is hard to conceive of such a contrast. Something of that same contrast, even contradiction, is in all of us when it comes to our relationship with the Lord. We have moments when we are in harmony with the Lord's will for us and other moments when we are in conflict with his will for our lives. Yet the Lord kept faith with Peter, in spite of his failings. Equally, the Lord keeps faith with us too, even when we show ourselves unfaithful to him. According to today's gospel reading, Jesus built his church on a rather flawed rock, a rock that could quickly become a stumbling stone. When addressing Peter as the rock Jesus refers to the church as 'my church'. Because it is his church, it will endure, even when those with pastoral responsibility for his church fail. Because the church has the risen Lord present within it until the end of the age (Mt 28:20), the gates of the underworld, the powers of evil and death, will never hold out against it; they will not ultimately triumph. Even when in our weakness as disciples we become stumbling stones, he at least remains our rock.