

HOMILY – 21A IN ORDINARY TIME

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Father Jim Carini

*"You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it"*

In today's Gospel reading, we hear Christ tell Peter that he is the rock on which he will found his Church, and he says that the gates of hell, the netherworld, will not prevail against it. How comforting a thought this is, that the Church in which we were baptized and now live in community will never be overcome or destroyed by evil.

Of course, the problem that we face each day, and that the Church has faced for generations, is that it often looks like the gates of hell have prevailed. Whenever we read the headlines about another accusation of sexual abuse, or a financial indiscretion, or abuse of authority, or whatever, by the clergy, it can cause us to feel that the Church is being taken over by the evils in the world. When any member of the Church, especially a clergyman who is vowed as a representative of Christ himself, betrays such an exalted calling, we groan in anger and sadness over the situation. Some have even left the Church.

However, the problem actually began with Peter himself. We know that the apostle who is the rock of the Church betrayed the Lord that he loved at a time of his worst need. A betrayal like this does seem to have something hellish about it, doesn't it? Peter, Christ's chosen leader, who promised Jesus that he would follow him anywhere, denies that he ever knew him. *"Who me? Are you kidding, I don't know that criminal who is hanging on that cross!"* He not only said that once, but three times!

In fact, wasn't Peter's betrayal of Christ like that of Judas? The Gospels say that Satan entered into Judas before he betrayed Christ. There is certainly something hellish then about what Judas did. Why not think that the gates of hell prevailed against Peter too? So, what is left of the

deeply comforting thought that Christ's Church and the rock, Petrus, that it is founded on are truly safe from evil?

But there is a difference between Judas and Peter. It isn't that Peter repented and Judas didn't. The Gospels say that Judas did repent. Listen to Matthew's account: *"Then Judas, his betrayer, seeing that Jesus had been condemned, deeply regretted what he had done. He returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, 'I have sinned in betraying innocent blood.'"* The difference between Peter and Judas is this. When Judas saw the sin of his betrayal for what it was, he killed himself. He threw himself away as irredeemable. Peter, however, came back to Christ. He hung onto to the Lord he loved even in the face of his own brokenness.

That is why Peter is the rock on which the Church is founded. The Church is not a collection of the sinless. It was never meant to be. The Church was founded on Peter, who loved, and sinned, and held on to the Lord anyway.

The gates of Hell cannot prevail against this kind of love. This is a deeply comforting thought.