



My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In this Sunday's Gospel, we read of a dialogue Christ has with his disciples: *"Who do men say that the Son of man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:13-19).*

How appropriate that this is the Gospel for the Feast of Saint Peter, because it demonstrates why he is the rock (or Petros, from where Simon, the son of Jonah received the name Peter), the Chief of the Apostles. While the other disciples speculate that Christ is the prophesied return of Elijah, or a resurrection of John the Baptist, Peter alone has the faith to firmly declare that Jesus is both God and man, the second Coeternal person of the Holy Trinity. As Christ

says, Peter is blessed, because he has not learned this from men, but he has acquired it from his own experience of witnessing and living with Christ.

This Sunday is not dedicated to Saint Peter alone, but it is the dual feast of Saints Peter and Paul. Though Paul was not a disciple during Christ's ministry, it is thanks to him that we have a church which ministered to all the world. In the epistle for his feast day, Saint Paul writes of all that he has suffered in the name of the Gospel: St. Paul was lashed, stoned, beaten, shipwrecked; he spent nights hungry, cold, tired, and in danger from false friends. He goes on to describe a man who had revelations of heaven, saying, *"On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses... a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (II Corinthians 12:5; 7-11).*

There is much about this passage that is mysterious: we do not know the man of whom St. Paul speaks, nor have we learned about his visions; neither do we know exactly what St. Paul's thorn was, whether he speaks of a spiritual difficulty, or a physical illness. However, we can understand the words of God to Saint Paul. Even though Peter knew and openly proclaimed Jesus to be the Son of God, this did not prevent Peter from later denying Jesus three times. Saint Paul was on the road to Damascus to persecute Christians, when he encountered Christ. On this feast day, let us meditate on the reality that both Saints Peter and Paul are examples of men whose weaknesses were made perfect through God's grace. This is why these great Saints are models for us as Orthodox Christians: because if we share both their faith in Christ's divinity, then our weaknesses can be used for God's purposes as well. May Peter and Paul continue to intercede for us always.

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