

**Reflection on the Gospel-21st Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A
(Matthew 16:13-19)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

“Be yourself. Everybody else is taken”, sings Melinda Schneider. The lyrics of this song, composed for Melinda’s dying father, affirm some fairly obvious truths. Even though we know that “everybody else is taken”, most of us spend energy trying to measure up to other peoples’ expectations and fail to be truly ourselves. In our self-absorption, we can also misread others and fail to know them as they are. Being accepted as we are is among the most precious of gifts. Jesus knew this. He was utterly true to himself and he allowed others time to discover for themselves his real identity and the nature of his mission. If the mission was to succeed, then his followers needed to look beyond their preconceptions about him and accept him as God’s anointed one, as the revelation of the living God.

Jesus’ true identity is a key issue for Matthew’s community as it is for us. From the outset, he is presented as the anointed one of God, the Messiah or Christ. Before his birth, the reader knows him as “Emmanuel”, God with us. What the narrator asserts at the outset, certain characters in the story come to understand. Jesus’ fearless teaching and his healing ministry bring the crowd to recognise him as a prophet in the tradition of Elijah or Jeremiah or John the Baptist, and as the incarnate Wisdom of God. The power of God at work in Peter leads him to a deeper understanding of Jesus’ identity. Peter has faltered in the past and will falter again, even to the point of denying any knowledge of or association with Jesus. He finally arrives at deep insight, however, and proclaims his faith in Jesus as both Christ or Messiah and son of the living God. Insight is a gift, and God can work wherever there is openness and goodwill. Peter has both in abundance. He is declared “blessed” on account of this gift of insight, and entrusted with the “keys” of God’s empire.

The specific power of binding and loosing that is given to Peter is subsequently given to the community of disciples (18:18) where the saying is framed on the one hand by instructions about dealing with transgressors and on the other by the assertion that where two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus, he is there in their midst. “Binding and loosing” belongs to all who gather in the name of Jesus whom Matthew presents as God-with-us, as prophet and Wisdom, as the Christ and as the revelation of the living God. The exercise of the power “to bind and to loose” demands the same wisdom and insight as does the capacity to recognise and affirm the true identity of Jesus. Gathering in the name of Jesus is a challenge right now as we face the restrictions required to deal with pandemic. We pray for the wisdom to find new ways of being church and of truly dealing with transgression.