

“So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore.”

Jn 21:11

On Wednesday the Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church will gather in the Sistine chapel, and will be locked in conclave to begin the official round of deliberations and voting to choose the next successor of Peter and the 267th Supreme Pontiff and Vicar of Christ. It is a momentous occasion and only happens a few times in the life of any of us. But today's Gospel passage can help us understand why it's so important.

Again and again, throughout all four Gospels, Simon Peter is referred to by name, and is always placed first in any list of the Apostles, whether they are referred to by name or not. And it is St Peter who always acts first. It is Peter who declares Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God at Cæsarea Philippi, and who is then given the keys of the kingdom of heaven with the promise that it is on Peter, the Rock, that Christ will build His Church (Mt 16:13-19). It is Peter who walks on water (Mt 14:22-32). It is Peter whom Our Lord instructs to catch a fish and remove a shekel from its mouth to pay the Temple Tax for the two of them (Mt 17:23-26). And on Easter Sunday morning it is Peter who dashes into the empty tomb even ahead of St John who had arrived first (Jn 20:4-8). Throughout the Gospels, from the very first moment of his calling, Simon Peter held a place dear in the heart of Our Lord, and in His plans for His Church.

In today's Gospel it is St Peter, who has been told that he will become a fisher of men (Mt 4:19), who leads the others out onto the lake to fish and who, when they see the Lord, jumps into the water to race to the shore. Note that all seven of them, including Peter, could not haul the heavy catch of fish into the boat but had to tow it behind them. Note also that when they arrive at shore they see a charcoal fire burning. The last time Our Lord and

Peter were anywhere near a charcoal fire together was on the night of Maundy Thursday in the cold courtyard when Peter denied his Master three times, and Jesus, walking by, turned and looked at him.

But then something so small happens that we never notice it, but it is remarkable. Our Lord tells Peter to bring some fish from the boat, and Peter goes and hauls the net ashore. Alone! Previously all seven of them had been unable to haul the net into the boat. Now, Peter can haul it ashore alone. What's going on here?

It's another indicator of St Peter's position of authority even above the other Apostles. There are things that St Peter can do that it is not given even to the other Apostles to do. And, like taking the shekel from the fish's mouth earlier in the Gospel, this happens again and again only to Peter. Our Lord has marked St Peter out over and above even the other Apostles for a particular mission. And what is that mission? The next part of today's Gospel tells us.

In response to St Peter's three-fold denial, Our Lord now asks him three times, 'Peter, do you love me?' But he asks him not just whether he loves Him, but 'do you love me more than these?' St Peter is being raised, once again, to a higher plane of authority. And with each response Our Lord says, 'feed my lambs,' 'feed my sheep.' Our Lord is commanding Peter, over and above what He demands of His other Apostles, to take responsibility for feeding and nourishing with the Catholic Faith all those, both from the House of Israel and from among the whole peoples of the world, who come to a belief in the resurrected Son of God.

But here's a thing: when Our Lord gave St Peter the keys, He called St Peter Simon-son-of-*Jonah* (Mt 16:17) even though we know from today's Gospel and elsewhere that Peter is in fact son of *John*. This is not accidental. The Old Testament prophet Jonah turned away from the task of converting the hostile people of Nineveh but he, Jonah, was

converted and in the end did obey his God-given mission. Now, St Peter, who denied his Master on the night of Our Lord's arrest, is also being converted and turned back to his mission. Moreover, Christ had said that this is exactly what would happen when He, Our Lord, said to St Peter, 'I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not, and thou, being once converted, confirm [or strengthen] thy brethren' (Lk 22:32). Now, in sending St Peter out to feed His sheep, Our Lord is setting a seal on that mission, both to teach the faith and to lead and strengthen the other Apostles, just as popes today must teach the Catholic Faith with great clarity, and to lead and strengthen the faith of the successors of the Apostles, the bishops.

All of this matters because the successors of St Peter have a unique role to play in the life of the Church that Christ Himself built upon St Peter the Rock. Each Vicar of Christ has been entrusted by Our Lord with the responsibility of overseeing and continuing in time the work that Christ began on earth two thousand years ago. It is a dreadful responsibility, and not one that anybody in his right mind would choose to take upon himself.

Our job at this stage is to pray that the Cardinals may be guided in their deliberations by the Holy Spirit so that God can raise up for His Church a wise and holy man to fill the shoes of the fisherman.

Come, Holy Ghost, Creator, come,/ From thy bright heav'nly throne,

Come take possession of [their] souls, / And make them all thy own.