

## **Twenty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time A - The One Who Holds the Keys**

August 27, 2023

There was a taxi driver and a pastor. One early Sunday morning, both died, traffic accident for the taxi driver and natural death for the pastor. When they arrived at the Pearly Gate, Peter opened the gate with the key and welcomed the taxi driver while the pastor was asked to wait outside. The pastor said, "Peter, why? It's not fair!" Peter replied, "When he drives, his passengers pray. When you preach, your congregation fall asleep."

This Sunday we are presented with two figures who were given keys. The first is Eliakim who replaced Shebna to be the Master of King Hezekiah's palace back in the 8th century before Christ. God placed the keys of the Kingdom on Eliakim's shoulder. He would be Master of the Palace and the one through whom others would have to go to get access to the King. (Isaiah 12:19-23) The Gospel reading presents Peter as receiving the keys of the Kingdom of God. Like Eliakim, he would determine who has access to the King. Peter is usually pictured as carrying large keys, representing the authority given to him by the Lord. (Matthew 16:13-20)

Matthew's text is a magnificent summary of the self-understanding of the Church of the first generation, and of Peter's leadership role in that Church. Matthew used the term 'church' (in this and a later text). This term, that Paul used so frequently - echoing the Old Testament term for the community of faith of old Israel - refers to the New Israel inaugurated by Jesus. The 'gates' of the cities of antiquity were the embodiment of their strength. The Church founded on the ministry of Peter, the 'rock', will triumph over the dark forces of the kingdom of death; and, under Peter's leadership, open the way to the final Kingdom announced and inaugurated by the Saviour. The words of Jesus make clear the practical implications of the authority given to Peter. If this pastoral authority is shared with the other apostles (cf. Mt 18:18), it is only under the leadership of Peter that they can effectively carry out this pastoral responsibility. The choice of Peter as the head of the church shows the power of God at work - using the weak things of this world to confound the strong. Before his encounter with Christ, Peter's life had little meaning. The human aspect of Peter's life story is something we can easily relate. His weakness and moments of betrayal are common-place in our own lives. However his deep-seated trust in the person of Christ more than compensates for any failure as will a similar trust on our part. Peter's inspiring declaration of faith when asked by Jesus "Who do you say that I am?" leads us to confront ourselves: how are we living our faith in our every day lives? What are our moral standards, are they different from so many in society? Are we living our lives as responsible Christians showing we are true followers of Christ? How are we helping in building up the Body of Christ, the Church?

There are many remarkable things about the history of the Catholic Church. One is that the Church not only has survived the unbroken succession of catastrophes since her foundation that have put an end to kingdoms, empires, and even civilizations, but after each one it continues to grow, spread, and shape the course of human history. The great Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of England during World War II and the glue that held Britain together in the dark hours of that struggle, recognized this. He was not Catholic himself. But soon after the War had ended, he visited a Catholic convent. He was deeply moved by his experience. He told the nuns that they and the other convents like theirs were like a "ring of bright lights on the shores of a black, burnt-out world." The Benedictine monastery of Montecassino is an architectural symbol of this indestructible dynamism of our Church. Fifty-one years after its foundation by St Benedict it was demolished by the invading Lombard tribes, in 520. But the monks rebuilt it. In 642 the Saracens, Muslim invaders, captured and devastated the mountaintop monastery. Again it rose from the rubble. In 1343 an earthquake levelled the entire complex of buildings. A new complex soon emerged from the ruins. In 1943, American planes unleashed a merciless bombardment on the monastery, mistakenly thinking that it was being used by the German army, doing more damage than ever before. But soon after the war, a group of American Catholics built it back up. This is an image of the Church. You can bomb it, you can burn it, but you cannot bury it. Built on the solid and indestructible foundation of the papacy, nothing can hold it back from fulfilling its God-given mission

So who actually holds the Keys of the Kingdom? Jesus Christ is the judge of the Living and the Dead. He is the one who determines who will enter into God's presence after their death. But who holds the Keys to the Kingdom here on earth? Well, since these Keys were entrusted to Peter, and since Peter was the head of the Church in Rome, Peter's successor, the Bishop of Rome, holds the keys to the Kingdom. Right now, Pope Francis is that person. But the keys had been held by many before him. They will be held by all who will come after him. Pope Francis has captured the heart of the world, Catholic and Non-Catholic. His determination to allow the Church to be "poor and messy," as he would say, has resulted in millions applauding his reaching out to the marginalized of our society. His firm and decisive actions to remove those from ministry whose lives do not reflect the following of Christ has been a refreshing change from the old "close an eye and/or handle this quietly" that seemed to be the well-establishing of the Vatican. When he travels, people flock the streets to get a glimpse of this dynamic pope. But who is Pope Francis? He is Jorge Mario Bergoglio, an Argentine with a wonderful smile and a huge heart. But people do not line the streets to see Jorge Mario Bergoglio. No, they come to see Pope Francis. Why? Because he is the Pope. He is the successor of Peter. He is the one who is entrusted with the keys to the kingdom. He is our father on earth. The people who line the streets during Papal visits and who fill the Piazza San Pedro for the Sunday blessings and weekly audiences know that it is not just the man they are honouring; it is the office that the man holds they deeply respect. We have a concrete authority who guides us. He is rock-solid, to use the pun on the name Peter. Because of the Pope and the teaching authority of the Church, we know who we are when we say we are Catholic. We know the fundamental beliefs of our faith. Why? Because the Church is far more than individuals. It is the Body of Christ. The Borgia popes and others from the past certainly gave us poor examples of living the faith, at least by twenty-first century standards, but God still used them to guide His Church. Perhaps the most notorious of the popes was Julius II. One would be hard pressed to justify most of his life. Yet, he was the pope that gave the Church the Angelus.

Pope Francis knows how to pope too. He is firmly committed in promoting the faith, but at the same time he is loving to all those who are seeking meaning to life, who are seeking the Lord. Still, it is the office not the men that we honour. Back in the days before the last papal conclave, a reporter asked one of the cardinals what the process would be for selecting the new pope. The cardinal replied, "God has already chosen the successor to Peter. It is up to us to discern whom the Lord has chosen." This Sunday's readings remind us why we honour the Vicar of Christ, the Pope. We do not honour him for the individual he is, Jorge Mario Bergoglio. We honour Pope Francis, a man who has been entrusted with the Keys of the Kingdom. In the recent centuries we have been blessed with popes who were certainly holy men. Blessed Pius IX, St. Pius X, St. John XXIII, St. Paul VI, and St. John Paul II all gave us examples of how to live our Christianity. These men were intensely spiritual throughout their lives, not just as popes. They were beatified and canonized for the way they lived their Christianity, not for the way they exercised their authority. Other popes may not be candidates for canonization, but they all were holy fathers, entrusted with the keys to the Kingdom. We pray today for our Holy Father, and for the one who hopefully a long time from now will succeed him, one, whom God has already picked. And we thank God for devising a way to lead us on earth through the ministry of the man we call pope. God bless you all.