

21st Sunday of Year--Cycle A
(Isa 22:19-23; Rom 11:33-36; Matt 16:13-20)

Keys are something we are all familiar with; in these days of high crime we need to lock everything to avoid theft. Keys can be a nuisance. A man may find keys wear a hole in his pocket; a woman may have difficulty finding them in her purse. But keys can just as often represent power and authority. This goes back, it is said, to the very beginning of humankind. When God first created Adam and Eve and decreed that the man should cling to his wife and the two become one flesh, Eve complained, "If we are one flesh, we should be equal," to which God replied, "And indeed you are." Eve said, "Not so! You made him bigger and stronger. He can dominate me in many ways." God saw she was being reasonable, but He wasn't going to remake these perfect creatures, so He said, "I'll tell you what I am going to do: I will give you three keys: one to the kitchen, one to the nursery, one to the bedroom. So everything he wants or needs will be under your control. And so it has been to this day.

The power of the keys! Think of the power even an ordinary housekeeper has. How much more the majordomo of a large manor, and even more the chamberlain of Buckingham palace. The reason for all this interest in keys,

of course, is today's first reading (which has to do with the "key of the house of David") and the gospel (which has to do with the "keys to the kingdom of heaven").

The first reading is a prophecy of Isaiah, proclaiming the deposition of Shebna, who was in charge of the house, that is "majordomo," master of the palace, the highest of the king's officials. Isaiah accuses him of arrogance, ostentation, and other faults. The symbols of his office are to be taken from him and given to Hilkiyah who, unlike Shebna, will be a father to inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah. The foremost symbol of office is "the key of the house of David"; placing it on his shoulder would be a symbolic way of conferring authority: "when he opens, no one shall shut, when he shuts no one shall open."

It is worthy of note that there is only one other place in Scripture that speaks of a key, along with opening and closing. That is in the Book of Revelation. Jesus addresses the church in Philadelphia and here He is said to be "The holy one, the true, who holds the key of David, who opens and no one shall close, who closes and no one shall open." This tells us that Jesus has the authority of the key; as such He is able to invest Peter with it, as we read in today's gospel.

We are familiar with today's gospel as a basis for Peter's primacy among the apostles, his being the rock on which Jesus builds His Church, and the primacy of the

Popes as successors of Peter. Peter is given the keys, not to a palace, not to a city, but to the kingdom of heaven. This is often misunderstood (both in cartoons and more seriously) as making Peter a kind of gate keeper to heaven, admitting those who enter and excluding those who don't. But that is not what is meant: Matthew calls "the kingdom of heaven" what is elsewhere called "kingdom of God"; that is, the new order of salvation that Jesus came to announce and to establish.

But the apostles *were* expecting an earthly kingdom: the mother of James and John asked for places at Jesus' right and at His left when He came into His kingdom; after His resurrection, the apostles asked Him, "Lord, are you going at this time to restore the kingdom to Israel?" So it has been aptly said that while the apostles expected a kingdom, what they got—at Pentecost—was a Church. Their role was to bear witness and the Church was to continue the work of establishing God's kingdom, ultimately to include the whole earth.

So Peter was left with the keys to the kingdom, which at this point was the Church. Just as in the OT passage, the bestowal of the keys indicates that Peter is the one "in charge of the house"—an apt metaphor for the Church. Rabbinic sources suggest that the power to bind and loose has to do with the power to give authoritative teaching, but also much more. Whatever Peter does on earth is ratified in

heaven.

It is of interest that the other two passages that spoke of keys also spoke of opening and closing, while this one speaks of binding and loosing. Keys, however, do suggest opening and closing, and that is also implied here, the authority to include and exclude people. Of course the Church wants to include all and exclude none. The Church's mission will be complete and will become the Kingdom of God only when God is all in all (1 Cor 15:28), only when there is "one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:6).

Unhappily, there are many in our culture who think it is proper to exclude people. We think especially of the white supremacists at the recent rally in Charlottesville. These people have no keys, no authority, but they close doors to exclude others—all who differ from them in race, color, nationality, non-Aryans. Last Sunday we had the beautiful reading from Isaiah: "For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples, says the Lord." Archbishop Gomez of Los Angeles, citing that passage and the gospel about the Canaanite woman, said, "Today's readings remind us that God wants His Church to be the home for all peoples—to be one family that welcomes men and women of every nation, every race, every language and every culture." The USCCB has established an Ad Hoc Committee on Racism, saying "the times demand it; our

Gospel demands it.”

So the keys of the kingdom should open every door. But it won't help to open doors if hearts are closed. Again from the Book of Revelation we find Jesus saying, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock” (Rev 3:20). There is a well-known painting by Ronald Halverson that illustrates this. There is no doorknob and no key to the door because it represents the human heart, which can only be opened from within. The Church is made up of *us*; *we* are the living stones. It is *we* who do the opening to our brothers and sisters, and *we* who do the closing. Opening doors does no good if hearts are closed. There may be closed borders, but let's keep our hearts open.