

Isaiah 22:19-23; Ps 137; Romans 11:33-36; Matt: 16:13-20

It is about 700 years before the birth of Jesus. Shebna is the steward of King Hezekiah of Judah, who sits on the throne of David. This position of 'steward' - or 'steward of the household' in full - makes Shebna a very powerful person, perhaps the second most powerful person in the Kingdom. As steward he has authority over the entirety of the king's household. Quite literally he holds the keys: to the royal household, to open and lock the treasury and to the royal chambers, and therefore access to the king himself. Those keys, worn on a sash as a sign of his rank, are therefore not only a sign of authority but functional. The role of steward has been handed on from generation to generation of succeeding stewards. And so Shebna has abused not only the authority but the tradition. How he has abused this power we are not told in detail, but it is not hard to imagine that it probably included bribes, manipulating access to the King, persecuting those in his power and generally being a rotten egg. For this God sends the Prophet Isaiah to tell him that he will lose his position to another man, to Eliakim, who is worthy to take up the role of royal steward, and to have placed on his shoulder 'the key of the house of David.'¹

Two things worth observing:

Firstly, it is not the king who removes Shebna, it is God. The abuse of authority is an affront against the King, who is supposed to be the source of justice for the holy, earthy kingdom of Judah, but ultimately the abuse of authority is an outrage against God, from whom all authority flows.

Secondly, the key is said to be placed on the shoulder of Eliakim, which portrays it as something of a burden to be borne, and not a possession to be abused.

When Jesus says to Peter '*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 I heaven*'² none of this significance would have been lost on the listening disciples. The passage from the prophet Isaiah which we have just been exploring is unique in the mention of keys in the Old Testament, and here , in all its significance it is applied to Peter. The keys Jesus gives Peter makes him steward of heaven, carrying real authority, the riches of the Church, the ability to enter into the royal chambers of heaven, and access to Christ Himself. Some interpreters of scripture have conceded that Peter is given a unique role by Christ, but they then argue that this ended with his death. But did you notice what I mentioned previously, that the role of Steward of the royal household was one of succession? Which is to say it was passed on as a continuous role, over the centuries from the time to David.

This is role, the nature of the keys, has been handed down in succession through the Bishops of Rome over the centuries to our current pope. It is a real power and authority that Jesus has entrusted to those who are in the post. The keys to heaven do not change, only the steward who uses them.

Those words of Jesus that speaks,

'Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed I heaven' sound beyond the capacity of man. Why would God give man such power? Could it be true?

¹ Isaiah 22

² Matthew 19.

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It would be a good reason not to go to confession if you don't really believe that the power of forgiveness flows from Jesus into the hands of men.

However, it seems that God wishes that the breach between heaven and earth be mended. He wishes the distance between God and man not to be ever impassable but experienced by the warmth of human hands that bless and turn the key. The same warmth that Jesus felt when he shared our human nature and touched our brokenness: the woman caught in adultery, the lepers, the blind, the lost, the dead. This is what he wants because it is the path he has chosen for our redemption, for our reintegration into the divine. They are his terms and conditions. 'I just go to God direct...', you say? 'No, you need to be humbler than that, we need to go in trust of Jesus.

And for us? At some time we will all be called to act with an authority we have been given: within our own homes or our communities. As a mother or father, wife or husband, as a grandparent; in the capacity of our profession; in the capacity of our friendships; and our faith. We may not feel that we have the authority of the keys of heaven, but we have been given some responsibility and authority, even if it appears to only be over a small room with a small door and a small lock, such as the soul of a child, a sick or elderly relative or a family member who is an addict. This is God's domain also. Here we are called not to abuse the sacred Trust, but to be faithful in its exercise. Here, in these small, every day spaces, we are to gaze up to heaven and help bind or loose as we are guided by the Church. Here we are all accountable to God.