

A bonus Sermon for Sunday 23rd August by The Reverend Doctor Jacky Sewell

Matthew 16:13-20; Romans 12:1-8

I have a bunch of keys here. Last week I had an email from the Bishop's office, asking me to return one of them. Not, I hasten to add, the Golden Key which containeth all truth as is revealed to the Lord Bishop of Hereford. Just the key to an ordinary office that I'd held onto a bit longer than I should. (Did I think it conferred on me some special authority or access that others didn't have? Hmm. I'm going to come back to that later). So there I am, holding this bunch of keys, and wondering which key was for what. I'm sure you all know the feeling. And I couldn't simply try them out and find the right one. I had to figure out, through a process of elimination and discernment which one was most likely to be the one demanded of me. After a lot of thought I was fairly convinced that I had found the right one, put it in an envelope and stuffed it through the letter box in the front door of the Diocesan office. Phew. We're going to come back to that later, as well.

The Church Universal has a complicated relationship with keys. It has become a key metaphor - if you'll pardon the pun - for the officeholder of ultimate authority under God. The church historian in me wants to take you down a fascinating rabbit hole of how the tussle for power and authority was played out between the Pope of Catholicism in Rome and the Patriarch of Orthodoxy in Constantinople but I'll leave that fascinating story for another time - let's close the rabbit hutch and lock that gate for now. Instead, let's head back to the source of this fascination with St Peter's Keys as the symbol of temporal power in God's earthly kingdom.

So there they are, Jesus and his disciples, alone for once, as both Matthew and Mark tell the story, in the northern coastal town of Caesarea Philippi, safely away from Jerusalem so there are no prying eyes or listening ears of the Temple spies, and Jesus can discuss, seriously, his identity as the Son of God and where it might all lead. He asks all of them: what are people saying out there? What's hot on the Galilean gossip vine? The Jerusalem Journalists? Oh they're saying all sorts - everyone thinks you're one of our great prophets returned to speak to us from God again. Hmmm, says Jesus. And what about you? What do you reckon?

The dialogue which follows between Peter and Jesus crackles with liveliness and plays on words and witty repartee. To really appreciate this passage, you will have to suspend the notion that every word that came out of Jesus' mouth was serious and weighty and you-heard-it-first-here. For starters, there's the wonderful way which Jesus turns Peter's words around and plays them right back to him. (I cannot get the visual image out of my head, of Jesus throwing back his head and roaring with laughter as he says it.) Peter kicks off with: "We know you are Jesus of Nazareth but your true name is Messiah - the Christ. And you are the Son of God - that's your true genealogy." Jesus kicks it right back at him:

“Blessings pour down upon your head, O you who were born as Simon from your father Jonas! You didn’t learn this from your father or earthly ancestors. You’ve been listening to my Father instead! And, what’s more, I’m going to give YOU a new name: The Rock!

Now we tend to take this at its face value. Jesus has seen the strength and simplicity of Peter’s faith and publicly affirms that these are the core qualities that will be needed as the message of the Christ is spread through the world. This will be the basis of discipleship: a simple, clear affirmation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and the courage and the passion to say it like it is. This is how Peter, the Rock, has been portrayed through history: the simple fisherman from Galilee who found his voice at Pentecost and went on to be the preacher and founder of the church in Rome. And here on the shores of the Mediterranean Jesus gives him the mandate to lead the fledgling church and become first amongst the disciples. Keys, authority to loose and to bind, the works.

Except it’s not that simple. Two verses later - two verses - Peter and Jesus are having a very tense conversation. Peter is telling Jesus to stop with all this business of suffering and dying and in the name of God forbids it! Talk about taking his newly-found authority to heart. And what does Jesus do? Jesus really turns on him and calls him a ‘Satan’ - a deceiver - and plays on his name again - the Rock is now a Stumbling Block to Jesus’ mission.

Peter’s career in the Gospels is a roller coaster. As a narrative of Peter the man, it’s a salutary lesson in being human and stuffing things up and the power of friendship and the overwhelming compassion and grace of God which sees our true worth, not our mistakes. Today he is the Rock. Next week’s gospel has him as the Stumbling Block. Then Jesus singles his old fishing buddies out and takes Peter, James and John up the mountain of Transfiguration to the height of dazzling glory. Then during the week of Jesus’ passion the Rock crumbles and Peter slinks away into the darkness, to hide his shame. And the final story from all four Gospels has Peter singled out by Jesus on the stoney beach, around the fire, and he subjects Peter to a gruelling test of his loyalty. Peter, do you really love me? Not once, but three times, to Peter’s hurt and humiliation, as Jesus drills home the tenacity and courage that this Rock is going to need, in the years ahead.

As I say, as a narrative of Peter the Man, it is a powerful testimony to the faith which God has in us. But there’s a second narrative, running along beneath the surface: that of Peter as First among the Apostles, the first Bishop of Rome, and the one from whom all subsequent Popes have claimed their mandate and authority; the cornerstone of all church systems of organisation and hierarchy right down to our Church of England hierarchy of bishops, priests and laity. Mandate, keys, authority to loose and to bind, the works. If we read these stories of Peter’s roller-coaster career through that lens, as prophetic warnings to the church about being a stumbling block and seeking glory and betrayal and public

humiliation, they make for sober reading. I am not going to expand on that today, though you might like to ponder these things another time.

What I do want to ponder, as we begin to draw the threads of this sermon together, is some of the other nuances at the end of that crackling dialogue between Jesus and the disciples in Caesarea Philippi. Those fated keys: what did Jesus mean by the keys of the kingdom and binding things on earth? Is this another of his slightly obscure parables or metaphors about tying people or things up with chains and locks? Like many of Jesus' parables and clever metaphors, he was using language and concepts that were well-understood in his day. Isaiah uses similar language in speaking of rulers over Israel, that they shall hold the key and have power to shut and open (Is 22:22). More importantly, there was a common understanding that the scribes and pharisees of the law and scripture were key-holders - the interpreters and teachers of the tradition were said to "hold the key" to the scriptures. Later on in Ch 23 Jesus pours scorn upon the Pharisees who "lock people out of the kingdom of heaven". He would strip legalism of this power and authority and make it subject to the laws of love and grace and mercy. And this is precisely what he intends, by giving this mandate to his disciples. Yes, Jesus didn't just give this power to Peter alone. Two chapters further along, Ch 18, Jesus is once again alone with his disciples. They had come, asking about greatness and power, and this time, he gives to all, collectively, the power to loose and to bind. Friends, if ever an antidote to the unwise use of power were needed, the whole of Matthew 18 gives a strong message of grace and love and mercy. Jesus makes the point that it is the church, together, the whole ecclesia - not just those in highest authority - that should strive for wise consensus and humble discernment.

Remember at the beginning of this sermon I said I would come back to the sting in the tail of the niggling suspicion that holding keys to the Diocesan office confers on me some special authority or access? The word that I'm really wanting is accountability. They aren't MY keys. I hold them, on trust, for a time and a purpose. All ministry is like that - ordained or lay.

I also described how I was standing there, holding this bunch of keys, and wondering which key was for what. I had to figure out, through a process of elimination and discernment which was the one I had to hand back. I may not have got it right. I may get another email from the Bishop's office telling me that I got it wrong. But that bunch of keys is a powerful reminder to me that using the right key, at the right time, to open the gates of grace and love and mercy, is a fundamental task of those of us who would call ourselves disciples of Christ.

Jacky Sewell