

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A
August 24, 2008

Readings: Isaiah 22:19-23; Romans 11:33-36; Matthew 16:13-20

Trust the Keeper of the Keys

We all have keys that we use to gain access to different things and places. They are small and compact and fit in our pocket or purse. In my pocket now I have a key to my car, to my house, and to this church building. But in the days of the early Jewish kingdoms, the keys to the palace were very large and the one in charge actually wore them slung over his shoulder. This person was the keeper of the keys, the king's right hand man. He wasn't the king, but he was in charge when the king was away.

In our first reading we hear a little about this history. God speaking through the prophet Isaiah says about Eliakim: *"I will clothe him with your robe, and gird him with your sash, and give over to him your authority. He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah. I will place the key of the House of David on Eliakim's shoulder; when he opens, no one shall shut; when he shuts, no one shall open."* Eliakim was placed in the position of the keeper of the keys for the Kingdom of David. There were others before him and others that would come after him.

It is with this same imagery that Jesus announces that Peter will be the first keeper of the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus says: *"I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."* Jesus places Peter in a position to be in charge of his Church because He knew He would leave this earth to return to His Father. And since his Kingdom will last forever, it is only logical that other men, our popes, would need to succeed him through the ages.

Peter was put in this position because of his great faith about what had been revealed to him by God the Father; that Jesus was the anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ. Peter didn't sit down one day and consider all the facts in front of him and come to a logical conclusion that Jesus was *"the Christ, the Son of the living God."* He learned this truth by listening to God and trusting Him. Then he looked at all the realities around him, all that Jesus had done, all the miracles He had performed, and then Peter could realize that this was quite a reasonable thing to believe.

It is much the same way we learn things in everyday life. We have people we trust who instruct us and share their knowledge with us. We believe what they tell us, but we still check it against the facts we see in the world to see if it is consistent, if it is a reasonable thing to believe. We might not necessarily prove whether the information is correct or not, but we can come to determine whether it is plausible, reasonable, or even very probable. If we trust someone, we believe what they tell us, but if it is an important matter, we try to understand what it is we believe and why.

This is the concept we have in religion as well. St. Anselm defines theology as *faith seeking understanding*. Faith comes before reason. We first believe as God reveals Himself to us, and then we try to understand our beliefs to see if they are consistent with the clues we see in the world. After we have examined enough clues we can determine that our faith is indeed quite reasonable.

God reveals Himself to us in different ways. One very important way is through His Church with the pope, successor to Peter, in charge as the keeper of the keys. It is quite a comforting reality for me in this complex world to have Christ's Church present to guide me in my faith. I hope it is for you as well. I do not have to reason out the answer to all of the complex problems we face. I can trust in the Church to give me guidance. I believe what the Church tells me, and for the matters that are particularly critical or troubling for me, I can dig in and try to understand the Church's teachings better. But faith comes before my pursuit of understanding.

I must start by believing what the Church teaches me about contraception, embryonic stem cells, capital punishment, homosexuality, euthanasia, abortion, and just war theory. If I have trouble accepting any of these teachings, it is my responsibility to try to develop a better understanding of why the Church holds these teachings. The burden is on me to truthfully find a flaw in the Church's theological and philosophical position to justify why I could reject that position. I cannot simply reject Church teachings because I casually disagree with them or find them inconvenient.

The Church that Jesus built 2000 years ago upon Peter the Rock is a source of great comfort. It was established to give us guidance and not to be a source of oppression. G. K. Chesterton uses a wonderful analogy in his book, Orthodoxy, to show how the rules of the Church actually provide us with the freedom to be happy. Here is a quote:

We might fancy some children playing on the flat grassy top of some tall island in the sea. So long as there was a wall round the cliff's edge they could fling themselves into every frantic game and make the place the noisiest of nurseries. But the walls were knocked down, leaving the naked peril of the precipice. They did not fall over; but when their friends returned to them they were huddled in terror in the center of the island; and their song had ceased."

The Church's rules are like those walls that restrained the children and kept them safe. In faith, we can trust in the Church to identify our boundaries so that we do not need to be afraid. Embrace the authority of the Church and the pope, our leader here on earth, and you will be much happier; you will be like joyful children at play.

Deacon Joe Hulway