

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 27, 2017, Year A
Father Mike Holloran

In the window in the very back of Church, on the south side, you can see today's Gospel reading illustrated: Christ giving the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven to Simon, whom he has just named Peter-- Petros, the rock.

They were not actual, physical keys. The Kingdom of Heaven is not a physical place. They were symbols of authority, a symbol that went back at least as far as Isaiah. When Eliakim replaced Shebna as Master of the Palace, a position similar to a Prime Minister of England today, running the daily affairs of government on behalf of the King, Eliakim was given the key of the House of David. Peter is given the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, entrusted to run the Church on behalf of Christ the King. But if he violates that trust and abuses his authority there will be consequences. Christ told a few parables about a steward being left in charge while the master is away.

There is another Gospel passage also illustrated in the same window. Peter is shown holding a shepherd's staff, and we see a few sheep nearby. But Peter was a fisherman. What gives?

This refers to the incident at the Sea of Galilee after Christ rose from the dead, when he asked Peter three times "Do you love me?". It was a painful reminder to Peter about the three times he denied knowing Jesus, but it gave him a chance to make amends. "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you", Peter answered three times. And each time the Lord said, "Feed my sheep".

How will Peter feed the flock? By maintaining and teaching the truth of the Gospel, and the staff is for fighting off wolves, and for nudging the sheep when they are heading into the brambles or getting too close to the cliff.

This is a big responsibility-- holding the keys so that when he shuts no one may open, and filling in for the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep. What mere mortal can do this?

A mere mortal who is blessed with a special grace and relies upon it. Peter was entrusted with feeding the flock because he loved the Lord, relying on his mercy. He was entrusted with the authority of the keys because it was the Heavenly Father, not flesh and blood, who revealed to him that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

There was another promise of divine help, at the Last Supper when Jesus said to Peter: "Simon, Simon, Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your

brothers.” (Lk. 22:31-32)

Did Simon's faith fail when he denied knowing Jesus? No, his nerve failed. When he recovered his nerve, he strengthened the others with his own unfailing faith, sustained by divine help.

Acts of Apostles shows Peter doing this. He is the one who proposes replacing Judas with a successor, he proclaims Christ risen to the crowd gathered outside the house on Pentecost, he speaks for them all when they get in trouble with the Sanhedrin, he follows divine inspiration to welcome Gentiles into the Church for the first time, Cornelius and his household. So, Pope-like, this activity of Peter, especially what he did at the Council of Jerusalem, described in Chapter 15 of Acts.

The issue was about those new Gentile converts. Did they have to keep the Law of Moses to be saved? Did you have to be Jewish to be Christian? The question became so heated that all the apostles and presbyters met together in Jerusalem to discuss it. Acts describes the scene:

“After much debate had taken place Peter got up and said to them” -- and I will paraphrase his remarks-- “You all know that God chose to speak through me to the Gentiles. They believed and God granted them the Holy Spirit, just as He did us. Why are you now trying to burden them with the old Law? On the contrary, we believe that they like us are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus.’
And the whole assembly fell silent.”

Notice what he did there, the rock, the shepherd. He listened to the discussion, but then he proclaimed what “we believe”, and they fell silent. All that remained for the assembly was to translate the faith of the Church into practical directives for the Church. What we have here in the first century, described in the pages of the Holy Bible, is a paradigm of what would follow, up to our own day. Right there in the Bible we see the Catholic Church in its infancy doing what it has done ever since-- Christians debating, Councils meeting, Peter maintaining the truth of the Gospel. How is this not convincing to everyone?

Well, because not all Popes have been worthy of their office. There are 81 canonized saints among the popes, starting with St. Peter. That leaves 186 others, some of whom were scoundrels who abused their authority. They destroyed the trust of some, who then separated themselves from that authority. They deny that Jesus intended for Peter and the rest of the apostles to have successors. Jesus gave the keys of the Kingdom to Peter, not to John Paul, Benedict, or Francis.

When you read about the Renaissance Popes you can understand the Protestant Reformers, but the answer to their denial of apostolic succession is to quote what Jesus said when he

gave the keys to Peter: “The gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.” He gave the keys for the duration, until he returns in person and no longer makes use of a vicar on earth.

The answer to the denial, I think, is the great, big, historical fact that occupies the space between us and the apostles-- the Church as she is and has been. Generation after generation of believers have persisted in electing successors to Peter and the apostles, and those successors have persisted in acting as if they had the responsibility and the authority that Christ gave Peter and the apostles, as if Christ himself was conducting the whole project from behind the scenes, as if the Holy Spirit has been active all along, not abandoning the Church with Constantine and returning with Martin Luther.

What did Christ really intend? One can always speculate, offering detached, non-committal theories like the disciples telling Jesus what other people were saying about him. But of all the hypotheticals, one great persisting historical reality has actually followed from the events recorded in Scripture. Trusting that Jesus did not lie when he promised to be with us, keeping us in the truth until the end of time, and that the gates of hell would not prevail over His Church-- trusting Jesus is why I'm still Catholic, and why I became a priest, and why you are in those pews this (evening/morning), all of us together persistently doing what he told us to do.