

Keys

Psalm 138; Matthew 16:13-20

"The Roman Catholic Church stands on this passage from Matthew's Gospel that talks about Peter being the 'rock' and the keeper of the keys of the Kingdom of heaven. In their way of thinking about the Church and its traditions, Roman Catholics believe that Peter receiving the metaphorical keys of heaven from Jesus is what makes the Church *the Church*. The keys of heaven are seen as a symbol of papal authority and are on papal coats of arms (those of individual popes) and those of the Holy See and the Vatican City State. They are to be seen everywhere.

When the King comes to Edinburgh, he is ceremonially presented with the keys of the city by the Lord Provost in a ceremony at Holyrood House, with the Provost saying:

We, the Lord Provost and the members of the City of Edinburgh Council, welcome Your Majesty to the capital city of your Ancient and Hereditary Kingdom of Scotland and offer for your gracious acceptance the Keys of Your Majesty's good City of Edinburgh.

The monarch returns the keys, saying:

I return these keys, being perfectly convinced that they cannot be placed in better hands than those of the Lord Provost and Councillors of my good City of Edinburgh.

Keys are such an important symbol. They imply trust, authority, responsibility. Can you remember being given the keys to your home, trusted to go out and lock up if no-one else was in; and trusted to come back in at a reasonable hour. A few of you might just about remember an old song: *'I've got the key of the door, never been 21 before!'* The 'key of the door' signified the reaching of adulthood and the independence that brought with it. I was given the key to the door at 12, quite a responsibility.

Keys are to be found on maps, and in books of instruction and text books to help us understand. Nowadays keys can come in card form with magnetic strips; or on computers and smart phones where you face, or a finger print can act as an unlocking key. Or those endless passwords needed to access computer accounts that have to contain eight letters, some in capitals, and another symbol or number, and possibly the donation of one of your kidneys. In the computer age locking and unlocking with technological keys has taken on a whole new significance. Being gifted keys implies maturity and responsibility.

In our Bible passage from Matthew we might be tempted to ask if Jesus giving Peter the keys of the Kingdom was a wise move. If we look at Peter's track record prior to and after this event it could be claimed he had the maturity of a sixteen-year-old. He was constantly missing the point and often talked before he thought. A few verses later Jesus calls him, "Satan" for setting his mind on human instead of divine things. How can anyone give the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven and build the Church upon someone so unstable? Peter was clearly fallible, untrustworthy, utterly human. Yet Jesus calls Peter the rock upon which the Church will be built, and gives him the keepership of the keys of the kingdom of heaven. What does this mean? Why does this matter? Some dispute that Jesus said these words and that they were written in Matthew's Gospel later on to shore up Peter's leadership of the Early Church. Be that as it may, the point is that it is not *who* Peter was, but *what* he had just said about Jesus that gives this idea of him being the 'rock', the 'foundation', importance. Jesus is looking for some kind of understanding in the community, and amongst His closest followers, about Who He was. Knowing *Who* Jesus was is a step towards understanding Jesus *what* Jesus means. When Jesus asks, "*Who do men say that the Son of man is?*" some thought He might be John the Baptist come back to life, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets. People might not have grasped Who Jesus was exactly, but they knew that

He was *someone*. When Jesus went on to ask, *"But Who do YOU say that I am?"*, it is Simon Peter who says, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*

Did Peter understand what he had said? Not in its entirety I suspect.

Jesus saying Peter (*Petros*) will be the rock (*petra*) upon which the Church will prevail, and granting him the keys to the kingdom of heaven, was not recognition of Peter's strengths or accomplishments. Rather it was because of his *testimony*. The Church is to be founded not on the person, the human being, but on the *testimony*, on what is said in answer to Jesus' question, *"But who do YOU say that I am?"*

Why does this matter today? Might it be this - that if Jesus could see the glimmerings of faith and understanding and trustworthiness in Peter, even in Peter, might Jesus not, when asking us who *we* say Jesus is, continue to build His Church on us, and grant to us the keeping of the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Who, me? The rock on which the Church is built? Who, me? Holding the keys to the Kingdom of heaven? This is a matter that is built on Who *we* think, and say, Jesus is. This is a matter that circles around what *we* do with our understanding and belief of Who and what Jesus is. We are not called, all of us, to have a theological level degree deciphering Who we believe Jesus to be. We are, however, all of us, called to make our response to that, 'Who am I? question, and measure our response to that question by the things that our answer impels us to become, and to do.

As followers of Jesus, as Christians, we have to come to some kind of decision about Jesus, and what He means to us and for us. Is He the great teacher and healer? Is He the setter of moral codes that govern our behaviour? Is He the model of hospitality and welcome? Is He the One Who makes us think about how we treat others, and ourselves? Is He the One that makes us look at the needs of the people around us, and to work out how we might try to respond? Is He the

One Who helps and encourages and forgives, and asks us to think how we might follow the example He set?

Are the foundations of our lives, our behaviour, our ethics at home and at work, our morality and our social engagement rock-like enough for Jesus to continue building His Church? You don't need to have a great Cathedral built on you; a little country Kirk will be just fine. But is your life the kind of life that, when built, can house and shelter and protect and provide for some of the people in your life?

When the keys of heaven are given to you, these are symbols of your being trusted to interpret and put into practice what it is that *you* believe to be important about Jesus. Feeding the hungry; clothing the naked; healing the sick; welcoming the stranger; protecting the vulnerable; showing solidarity with the poor; standing up for what is right; helping your neighbour whenever you can. Believing, yes, but also being and doing.

The reference to, 'the keys of the kingdom' and, 'binding and loosing', need to be seen against their Jewish background. The keeper of the keys in Jesus' day were the teachers of the Law who Jesus accuses of shutting the doors of heaven from the people because they don't make it easy for people to understand or share the living life of God's Kingdom ways. They obscure it with pettiness and meanness and misinterpretation, sometimes for their own ends. Much of the Old and New Testaments were written to challenge this practice.

But with Peter blurting out what he believed, and Who He thought Jesus was, and why that mattered, we find an ordinary, flawed human who had enough foundation in his life, and enough understanding in his mind, to share with others Who Jesus might be, and why Jesus might be important in the saving and healing of the world.

That is why Peter is called the rock upon which the Church will be built. That is why Peter is entrusted with the keys of the Kingdom of heaven. To enable people to get a firm foundation upon which they can start building lives of hope and kindness, and to open wide the doors of heaven to everyone who shows some understanding of what it means to be a child of God and a bearer of light and love.

Are you the kind of person Jesus can rely on to help our world build steady places of shelter and welcome? Are you the kind of person Jesus can entrust with the keys to the kingdom, to open the doors and let them in to an understanding of what faith looks like, and what faith can do.

Jesus believes you are! And He gives you His keys today.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen