

21st Sunday of Year

Caesarea Philippi was a town on the North East shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was developed as a shrine of the god Pan by the Greek kings of Syria in the Third Century BC and the site of a famous battle between the kings of Syria and Egypt in 198 BC. However, in the time of Our Lord it was a new town. Herod the Great erected here a temple of white marble in honour of his patron. In the year 3 BC, Philip the Tetrarch founded a city at Paneas. It became the administrative capital of Philip's large principality. In 14 AD, Philip renamed it Caesarea in honour of Roman Emperor Augustus, and made improvements to the city. His image was placed on a coin issued in 29/30 AD (to commemorate the founding of the city) something considered as idolatrous by the Jews. The city is a statement in stone of pagan beliefs and values.

The Kingdom of God is very different. So far Jesus has not spoken of himself as the King who is to come. This is not his way. Instead, he asks the disciples "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They report what people have been saying about him – perhaps he is John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the other prophets come back from the dead. Our Lord challenges them, "Who do you say I am?" Peter speaks up on behalf of the others, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." They recognise him as the Christ, the anointed one or Messiah, the King promised from ancient times. Who is the King? It is Jesus!

Next week we will hear our Lord rebuke Peter, when he imagines that it will mean worldly power and success instead of the cross. For the moment, though, he speaks positively of Peter's role. "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven: whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven." At the end of St John's Gospel, after the Resurrection, Our Lord will confirm this special charge to Peter in the three time repeated commission, "Feed my sheep."

The kingdom of which Jesus speaks is not a purely spiritual, invisible reality. It is incarnate – a visible, concrete reality. Just as God took on human flesh in Jesus because we are not angels but flesh and blood, so, too, his kingdom will be made up of human beings, filled with the Holy Spirit, but still flesh and blood. They will need continuing human leadership. Our Lord chooses to entrust this in a general way to all the Apostles – and they are empowered for this role on the day of Pentecost. To Peter, however, and to his successors, he gives a unique role. He is to be the focus and expression of the unity of the Church on earth, signified by the power of the keys.

To understand the meaning of the power of the keys we need to reflect on our first reading. Shebna's title in Hebrew is 'Over the House', and is often translated 'steward', but for a King this was not a primarily a domestic responsibility. It meant that he was, in effect, prime minister. He was King's right hand man, and could act off his own bat with the King's power and authority. A few chapters later Isaiah tells us how Eliakim, and Shebna, who was simply demoted to the second in command as secretary, went out before the city walls of Jerusalem to negotiate a truce with the Assyrian King, Sennacherib, who was besieging the city. Shebna and Eliakim could make war or peace in the King's name, and he could not withdraw from their decision. The key slung over the shoulder was the key to the royal treasury, and meant he could spend the royal funds without anyone else's say-so. He was a real power in the land. Unfortunately, it went to Shebna's head. The preceding verses of Isaiah tell us that he was dismissed because he used royal funds to build himself an elaborate tomb. Pride goes before a fall, but he was too good a servant to be sent packing completely.

When Our Lord speaks of the power of the keys, his audience, familiar with the words of Isaiah, and with the power of a steward, would be in no doubt as to what he meant. Peter was to be, in modern terms, his viceroy. Our Lord agrees to be bound by Peter's decisions to bind or loose, whether in heaven or on earth. Of course this does not mean Peter is made an absolute monarch with powers he can exercise in an arbitrary way. The powers entrusted to him are for the well being of the Church and the building of the Kingdom once Our Lord has ascended into heaven. Christ himself is the King, the rock, but in human terms, and for the Church on earth, Peter will be the rock on which the Church is built. He will be the shepherd who must keep the flock safe, and lead the sheep to fresh water and green pasture.