

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Aug 24th 2014

When we hear Jesus say to Simon bar Jonah, “I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven,” we have no trouble understanding the symbolism of passing on keys. Scholars rightly refer us to Isa 22:15-25, where the giving of keys to King David’s steward Shebna signifies the transfer of authority from Eliakim to him as master of the palace of David. The giving of keys in these biblical passages in Isaiah and Matthew resonates easily with the giving of keys in our own culture. When a parent gives her child the keys to the family car, the child recognizes this as the giving of authority (albeit temporarily) over the use of the car, typically for a date that evening. Similarly, when the high school basketball coach gives a trusted senior a set of keys to the gym to provide access to shoot buckets after hours, his peers recognize that he is in possession of significant authority. We get that.

But when Jesus goes on to describe the keys he is giving Peter as “keys to the kingdom of heaven,” the phrase easily triggers the memory of those many cartoons that portray St. Peter monitoring the pearly gates, allowing some people in, and others not. While that association provides the setting for some wonderful humor, it distracts us from the context of the biblical meaning of “keys to the kingdom of heaven.” For what is commonly called “the kingdom of heaven” in the Gospel of Matthew is the same reality called “the kingdom of God” in Mark and Luke—namely the Reign of God inaugurated by Jesus during his earthly ministry, the gathering of disciples who respond to the reign of God on earth, which Jesus inaugurates through his preaching and healing. This is what Jesus teaches us to pray for when we say “they kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven!” Entering that kingdom on earth does eventually lead to entering the divine realm we call Heaven, but the authority given Simon Peter is a power that he exercises on earth.

But this earthly authority is divinely authorized. That is what Jesus means when he says, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” In first-century Palestine, binding and loosing referred to the authority that a leader of a synagogue congregation had regarding the practical application of the Mosaic Law in daily life, and also the inclusion or excommunication of community members. So, in effect, Jesus was making Simon Peter the chief rabbi of the church.

Taking this language seriously helps us understand the accepting of the institutional reality of the church is as essential to Christian faith as believing in the humanity of Jesus. We know what people mean when they say, “I’m spiritual, not religious.” That statement usually means, “I try to take seriously God and my spiritual nature and destiny, but I have trouble relating to official church structures and external practices.” But today’s Gospel reading reminds us that Jesus established a concrete community of followers who were to understand themselves as heirs to the covenant life of Israel. That means working out our collective salvation in the context of divinely established earthly authority. That also means believing that the authority of God works through human frailty. All together now: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!”

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