

## **Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time: You Are Peter**

My guess is that most of you here have keys in your pocket, purse, wherever. Take them out right now. Look at them. What does each key do? Perhaps, one gets you into your house. Another lets you start the engine on your car. Maybe another gets you into your office. You know what a key does? It gives you power. You can get into that house. You can drive that car.

Today's first reading and Gospel reading talk about keys, keys that give power. In the first reading keys are taken away from one man, Shebna, who had been the steward of the palace, and given to another man, Eliakim. Eliakim now has the power of the palace. He could decide what happened there. He could admit people into the presence of the King.

In the Gospel reading keys are promised to another man, Peter. Jesus tells Peter that he will give him the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, whoever he admits will go into heaven, whoever he does not admit will not get in.

The scene is one of the most famous in the gospel of Matthew. It's from Matthew 16. Jesus asks his disciples what the people are saying about him. Who do they say that he is. They respond, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, or Jeremiah or one of the prophets?" "But who do you say I am?" Jesus asks. Simon the fisherman, the son of Jonah, speaks up, "You are the Christ, the son of the Living God." Jesus is elated with him. "Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but the Holy Spirit has, and I say to you, 'You are Peter,' petra, a word that means Rock. "And on this rock I will build my Church. And the forces of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whoever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, who ever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Who is this Simon, now called Peter? He is a fisherman from Galilee, who heard about Jesus from his brother, Andrew, and who was called by the Lord to leave his fishing boat and follow Him. He was a man whose faith in Jesus was growing. Two weeks ago we saw that he, Peter, walked on water to Jesus, until his faith dwindled, and he almost drowned. After the promise of the keys of heaven, Peter was recognized by all as the head of the disciples. On Holy Thursday, Jesus had said that he would be betrayed and that they would desert him. Peter, said that he would never desert the Lord, but before dawn of the next day, he denied him three times. He agonized over his weak faith, and sought forgiveness. And Jesus forgave him. He also asked him three times if he loved him. Three times Peter said that he loved Jesus. And three times Jesus told him to feed his sheep.

And then Pentecost came. Peter was in the Upper Room with the other disciples, and with Mary. The Holy Spirit came and descended on them. The Church was born. And Peter was its head on earth. All the disciples recognized this, even a new disciple who was converted from persecuting Christians to becoming a Christian

and leading others to Christ. That disciple was named Paul. St. Paul wrote that before he preached to others, he went to see Peter to be sure that he was proclaiming the Gospel properly.

Peter eventually went to Rome. There he founded the first Christian community in Rome and led it as what would later be called its bishop. Because Peter was in Rome, the charism or grace he received to lead the Church would be given to all who followed him as Bishop of Rome. Peter would die, he would be martyred. Tradition says that he was led to be crucified. He said that he did not deserve to die like Jesus died, and he was crucified upside down, with his head down and his feet up. Peter was crucified in the circus of Nero, the chariot race course located on the Vatican Hill. Tradition has it that he was buried there. Future popes would build a cathedral over where they heard that Peter was buried. In 1957 a piece of plaster was found in that area that said, Peter is here. Bones were then found in the area. Tests on the bones lasted ten years, until 1963 AD, and they confirmed that it was a single male individual of Palestinian origin, who had lived about two thousand years ago. It was almost a complete skeleton. The only thing missing were the bones of the feet, which confirmed the belief that Peter had been crucified upside down. Peter is sometimes pictured with an upside down cross. Most of the time, though, he is pictured with keys, the Keys of the Kingdom.

We are Roman Catholic because Peter, the Keeper of the Keys, the One upon whom the Lord said he would build his church, was bishop of Rome. His successors, the bishops who followed Peter, would also, like Peter, be first among all the bishops of the Church. They would be given the name, Papa, or Pope.

Pope Leo XIV is the present bishop of Rome. As such, he holds authority over all the Catholic Churches.

If you were to go to the basilica of St. Peters in Rome, you would see the great dome over the altar. On the inside of the dome are the words, "You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church." Every Pope reads this and recognizes his responsibility to hold the keys, to reign over the Lord's Church.

I present all this to you today so that you can understand that the foundation of the Church came from the decree that Jesus made to Peter that he would hold the keys of the kingdom. The papacy was not created by anyone other than Jesus Christ himself.

Look at your keys again. They not only give you power. They confer on you a responsibility. Your car keys give you a responsibility to drive carefully. Your house keys give you a responsibility to be sure your house is locked and safe when you are not there. You don't open your house to anyone. You have a responsibility to care for your house.

Peter was given keys. The keys were given to his successors. What a deep

responsibility the Pope has to continue the charism of Peter. What a deep responsibility the Pope has to care for the house, for the Church.

Today we pray for the Pope, right now Pope Leo XIV. We pray that he have the courage and the humility to continue to work of Peter. And we pray that we might have a deeper understanding of what it means to be a Roman Catholic.