

The Sacking of Shebna

Why was Shebna sacked as Master of the Palace? He wasn't entirely run out of the court, because he later appears as one of the royal scribes. We know that he was sacked for building himself a magnificent tomb: an odd idea to our way of thinking, but perhaps he was showing an unhealthy interest in his own reputation as a great man, even after his death. Pope Julius II was rather similar; his tomb would have filled a huge part of the space in the nave of St Peter's if it had been built, and it would have been adorned with a massive collection of Michelangelo's statues. Fortunately it didn't happen, and that's why the Pope today can walk down the nave of his gargantuan palace chapel (St Peter's) without colliding with his predecessor.

Have Some Keys

Eliakim is appointed by the gift of a bunch of keys, and the authority to admit or to exclude people from the palace: but always with a fatherly care - towards the people, but also towards the king. Perhaps this is a clue to the failures of Shebna: he used his authority to exclude and to disinherit, rather than to grant access and to unite. Maybe we could ask ourselves whether God has entrusted any keys to us, and if so, whether we have used them to lock up or to open, to admit or to exclude. I think at once of our parents and teachers, who have the lives and minds and hearts of children in their hands. They can open up the world to their children, in all its complexity and splendour; or they can slam the world shut, and make it a cramped and cheerless place where there is little to hope for. How lovely it is to see a little one receiving the fulness of life from a parent or a teacher! I particularly love to see a parental head bowed over a child in church, offering a bridge to faith and understanding in a strange, adult world where much of what's happening is quite beyond the mind of a child. That is a ministry which is sustained week by week in our Church by those who prepare the children's liturgy; and we are all deeply grateful for everything that is done in this work. Equally it is distressing to see a child

who is marooned in a pushchair and ignored on a shopping-trip, loudly seeking attention, or, more disturbingly, silent and isolated. When Jesus asked that little children be allowed to come to him, he was saying something important, and the Gospels do not neglect the saying.

Peter's Keys

There's something childlike about Peter. His *Tell me to come to you across the water!* is like an arrogant boy who is certain he can do as well as his elders; and when Jesus solemnly warns them that he must go into his Passion alone, Peter says: *Why can't I come with you now?* - and receives the usual response offered to pestering children: *At the moment you do not understand. Later you will.* Nevertheless, the Lord does not wait for Peter to understand before awarding him *the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven*. These come to him because he has acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. This faith will, at last, bring him the wisdom he needs to be a guardian of the gate to life.

Infallible Peter?

Peter is most fallible in his understanding, but his faith remains. When Jesus is raised from the dead it is this faith which springs into action, sending Peter running to the tomb. He comes away dazed and uncertain, but confusion and uncertainty don't contradict faith. As Paul reminds the Romans today, no-one human is God's equal, no-one can commentate on the mind of God. In that sense the significance of Peter's keys remains totally dependent on the superior will of God. No authority on earth is cut loose from this obedience to God (not even Papal authority). When the pope employs the power of the keys, it must be in perfect accord with the will of the Father that bound even Jesus, the Christ. In this sense the pope must show himself to be the true Vicar of the one who said *Not my will, but thy will be done*. Against obedience to God, the very gates of Hell can never prevail. God bless the Pope! May he do the will of God on earth!

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