

21st Sunday Ordinary Time Year A

August 24, 2014

"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Readings: Isaiah 22: 19-23; Romans 11: 33-36; Matthew 16:13-20

The "power of the keys" is a biblical phrase replete with symbolism, and easily carries over into family life and even the workplace.

Admittedly, new technology is changing that, and many cars now boast "keyless" entry. Still, keys figure prominently in our lives, and have long been symbols of authority. Do you remember when you were first given the car keys? Who among us could ever forget? Suddenly, the whole world seemed at least to be at our disposal.

But if we missed curfew, drove too fast or got into a fender bender, we learned the painful lesson that driving was a privilege, not a right. Keys can also be misused as a symbol of authority, as can a uniform. So for example, an official can think that he automatically has earned respect because of the power he is able to wield. Absent of charity and virtue, authority is divorced from respect.

Following the November election of a new president, at precisely Noon on the following January 20, during a peaceful transition of power, the sitting president automatically becomes a private citizen, unable to command the troops or take advantage of the privileges of office. The moment a young person turns 18 years old, in the blink of an eye, the law treats him or her as an adult, for good or ill. In all this, power and authority are interrelated, but never should they be divorced from love and service. Even the Pope's authority is not really his own, since "the ministry of the Pope is a guarantee of obedience to Christ and to his Word."¹

Our relation to social and political authority is rooted in our own more basic relation to our parents, which in turn derives from God,

¹ In his homily of May 7, 2005, when Pope Benedict XVI took possession of the chair at the Cathedral of St. John Lateran as the then new Holy Father.

our Creator and Father, whose authority is absolute and unchangeable. When this is forgotten, bad things happen. In our prophecy from Isaiah, the Lord threatens a man named Shebna with the possible loss of his office on account of his arrogance. He was a scribe to King Hezekiah and took part in the negotiations between Judah (the southern kingdom) and the attacking Assyrians in which the surrender of Jerusalem was demanded. He was also sent to consult the prophet Isaiah. It was Isaiah who predicted that the Assyrians would **not** take Jerusalem.

In the line immediately before the start of today's passage, Isaiah tells the arrogant Shebna that the Lord will "roll you up and toss you like a ball into a broad land to perish there, you and the chariots you glory in, you disgrace to your master's house!"² Clearly, it is not only playground bullies who say such things. Remember, he was no king- who has even heard of him? However, even as a scribe, he tried to make his presence known to all.

Arrogance and pride led to his denunciation and exile. What is the lesson for us today? An obvious question today revolves around the reality of pride and arrogance in our own lives. How do we guard against exhibiting these sinful qualities, which in part have led to such a suspect attitude towards power and authority?

We can begin by recognizing the source of our authority. I have long cringed when people refer to the President of the United States as the most powerful man on earth. Certainly, without authority there is chaos; but without equality of persons, there is tyranny. Members of a family all have equal dignity, yet not equal authority. The same applies in the Church. Pope Francis leads the Church with great humility, but he also must make difficult decisions.

² Isaiah 22:18

Arrogance takes over when this fundamental fact is forgotten. In his letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul mentioned that respect for authority in reference to obedience of children to their parents— noting that this is the first commandment with a promise, namely, “that it may go well with you and that you may have a long life on earth.”

When we root out arrogance and pride and see authority and power in their true light, we will be free and we will be at peace.