

21st Sunday Ordinary Time Year A

August 22-23, 2020

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

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

A common theme throughout today’s readings centers on the centrality of authority and the importance of the keys. The power of the keys extends beyond the pages of the Scriptures. It easily carries over into the secular world, the life of families and the workplace. Do you remember the first time you were handed the keys to the car and drove alone? How could we forget! Such a feeling of freedom, but also responsibility.

I suspect you recall the incredible moment when Pope Benedict XVI resigned his office and they closed the doors at Castel Gandolfo just at the predetermined hour at which his resignation took effect. At the stroke of 8:00 p.m. on 28 Feb. 2013, we were *sede vacante* and a papal conclave would need to assemble. In the Church, once a bishop receives confirmation from the Holy Father that his resignation has been accepted, he loses his authority to lead, from the perspective of Canon Law. This happened recently in the Diocese of New Ulm, our neighbors to the west.

And when a young person celebrates his/her 18th birthday, in the blink of an eye, the legal landscape changes. Many things are now possible, which were impossible or illegal just a day before. New authority is given to a young adult, and it all happens in a moment.

While power and authority are interrelated, they should never be divorced from love and service. When Pope Benedict XVI took possession of the chair at the Basilica of St. John Lateran, the Cathedral for the Diocese of Rome, he explained that a 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 He said: “The Chair is the symbol of the *potestas docendi*, the power to teach that is an essential part of the mandate of binding and loosing which the Lord conferred on Peter, and after him, on the Twelve.”

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, homily on May 7, 2005

True authority is received from above; it is not derived on our own. The voice of the living Church is essential for a faithful interpretation of God's Word, entrusted until the end of time to Peter and the college of apostles.

In our daily lives, our relation to social and political authority is fundamentally rooted in our relation to our parents. Saint Paul teaches in Ephesians that the commandment to honor father and mother is the first to include with it a promise "that it may go well with you and that you may have a long life on earth."² In turn, their authority derives from God our Creator and heavenly Father, whose authority is unchangeable. When this fact is neglected, bad things follow.

Consider our reading from the prophet Isaiah. Shebna is warned of the possible loss of his office due to 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 part of a delegation sent to consult Isaiah. Recall, it was Isaiah who told them that the Assyrians would **not** take Jerusalem. Finally, the scribe had carved for himself an elaborate rock tomb for which he was roundly criticized by the prophet.

In the lines 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. There you will die, there with the chariots you glory in, you disgrace to your master's house!" Arrogance and pride led to him being denounced. Isaiah even predicted that Shebna would go into exile and die in a foreign land.

What is the lesson for us? How do we guard against exhibiting these qualities in our own lives, which has contributed to a suspect attitude by some towards power and authority? We can begin by recognizing the source of our authority at all stages of our lives.

² Ephesians 6:2-3

Family members share equal dignity, though not equal authority. The same applies in the Church. When this fundamental truth is ignored, arrogance creeps in. But when we root out arrogance and pride, viewing authority and power in their true light, we will be free and at peace.

I close with what is thought to be the most ancient prayer for political authorities, dating from the late first century. As we move towards a busy and contentious season in terms of our civic lives, this is helpful to recall:

Grant to them, Lord, health, peace, concord, and stability, so that they may exercise without offense the sovereignty that you have given them. Master, heavenly King of the ages, you give glory, honor, and power over the things of earth to the sons of men. Direct, Lord, their counsel, following what is pleasing and acceptable in your sight, so that by exercising with devotion and in peace and gentleness the power that you have given to them, they may find favor with you.³

³ Cf. St. Clement of Rome, Letter to the Corinthians, # 61