

Homily: 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time 2020

A few years ago my sister gave me a set of talks to listen to by a priest who had worked as a secretary to the Pope. On his first day at work he was accompanying Pope St Paul VI through part of the Vatican when they had to use a lift. The lift required a key to operate it, so the secretary produced the necessary key from his pocket and he and the Pope got into the lift. "Isn't that strange", the Holy Father remarked. "You've only been here a few hours and you have a key to this lift. I've been here for thirteen years and I still haven't got any keys to this place!" The secretary quickly replied: "Ah, yes, Holy Father. But you have the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven." "I do," the Pope retorted. "And they weigh very heavily in my pocket".

This little anecdote reminds us of a couple of important points. Firstly, that responsibility weighs heavily on those who are called to high office, in the Church and in the world more generally. The Pope has the phenomenal responsibility of holding the Church together in unity, love and truth, and he should be in our prayers each day. Secondly, it illustrates something important: the person who holds the keys is not the one in charge. The Pope does not carry round with him a physical set of keys. Neither, I'm sure, does the Queen, or any other Head of State. The one who is truly in charge has servants, stewards, who holds the keys on their behalf. And so it is with Christ. He is in charge; He is God. But He places into the hands of His servants, His stewards, the power to open and close, to bind and loose.

This authority is given in a unique way to St Peter and to his successors, the Popes. But later in Matthew's Gospel, as we'll hear in a couple of weeks' time, Jesus uses the same words and addresses them to a wider group of His disciples. While the Pope exercises this authority at a universal level, he shares it with the bishops of the Church; and there is even a sense in which each of us shares in this work. Perhaps you've had the experience of speaking to someone about their faith and, during the conversation, something has 'unlocked' for them – something has become clear or fallen into place; they have moved on from somewhere where they were once stuck. Maybe you've been the person who has been helped. I know I have, many times. Often it's been a priest or a bishop who has helped me, but many times it has been a parishioner, a friend, my parents or another family member. This is obviously different to the role of the Pope and the bishops, who have authority to bind us together in the truth of our faith and to loosen the chains we forge by our sins by granting us absolution in the Lord's name. But there is a sense in which each disciple, each one of us, has a role to play in unlocking the truth and beauty of our faith for one another, so making the gates of heaven ever more widely open.

How do we unlock this truth? The answer is clear in today's gospel: we need to know who Jesus is. "But you – who do you say I am?" It is because he knows the answer to this question that Peter is entrusted with the keys of heaven. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." This is not just a statement of doctrine. Peter is not simply reciting a pre-existing creed, but is speaking from his own experience. If we are to enter heaven, and if we are to help make God's Kingdom more accessible to others, we need to know Jesus. To

know Him not as a distant God, but as the Christ, the Anointed One, who saves me from my sins, who saves me from death. To know Him as the Son of the living God – and this means to know that God really is *living* – He is not in the past, or beyond reach, but living and calling us to Him today. And *to know Jesus* as the Son of this living God also means to live as sons and daughters of God ourselves, to know Jesus as our brother and friend, who wants to share His divine life with us. When we know this – when we *really* know this, at the level of our hearts and not just our heads – then the beauty of our faith is really unlocked for us, and the path to heaven is opened before us. All of the authority given to the Pope and the Bishops by Our Lord is to help us to come to know Jesus, to enter into relationship with Him. It has no other purpose. None of us here (or participating online) will ever be Pope; probably none of us will ever be bishops – but each of us is called to know Jesus and in some small way to share in the work of binding and loosing in the lives of those around us. We are all stewards of the mysteries of God, each entrusted with a small share in this work. But it starts with that simple question, which we can only answer when we ourselves have come to know the Lord Jesus as our Saviour, the Son of the living God. He asks us too: “Who do you say I am?”

Fr Andrew

