

**The 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Year A: Authority: do's and don'ts....**

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Isaiah 22:19-23: New Lord Chamberlain: new responsibilities;**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: Romans 11:33-36: Praise of God's wisdom and control;**

**Gospel: Matthew 16:13-20: Simon Peter's new responsibility & authority.**

As often happens, this week's first reading is given as an Old Testament commentary on how to interpret the gospel. The piece from Isaiah tells of the removal (in about 715BC) of the senior official Shebna from his job as administrator of the royal palace in Jerusalem. It runs: *"Thus says the Lord of Hosts to Shebna, the master of the palace:- 'I dismiss you from your office; I remove you from your post'."* Although we know him to have been arrogant and officious, I still feel sorry for him. There cannot have been many civil servants whose very public sacking – a sort of ancient 'P45' - have come down through 2,700 years of history! But the real point is how authority is meant to be used. Shebna's successor, Eliakim, was also to have serious power: the *"key of the House of David"* – meaning both the building and the people - but not in a bossy sense, like Shebna. No, he was to be a *"father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem"*, and this implies care and love, and not simply power.

It is in this light that we read the famous gospel, where Simon Peter makes his profession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah, and is rewarded by being given the "Power of the Keys" over the Christian Community. This obviously refers to Eliakim getting 'the keys of the House of David' all those years earlier. But in Simon's case, the authority was meant to be spiritual: binding and loosing access to the "kingdom of heaven" – meaning God's influence over us here. The word "Peter" loses its original sense in English, since in many languages it is the masculine form of a feminine noun for "stone" or "rock". The "rock" (or base) for future Christians was to be Simon's faith in Jesus.

What about us, today? As Catholics, we believe that the authority given to Simon Peter was passed on to his successor-Bishops (of Rome, where he ended up). What is less clear is the nature of authority that was intended by Jesus. Down the centuries, some Popes have used their 'power of the keys' like bossy Shebna; others more like Eliakim. I cannot help feeling that if any of the Popes of the past 60 years had been in charge during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there would not have been a Reformation. I do not wish to comment on the arguments that have circulated in recent years about Pius XII (who was Pope while I was at primary school) and his role in World War II. However, each of his successors – while being very different in style and personality from each other - has

certainly practised the idea of being “the servant of the servants of God”, to give the Pope his official title. Authority is not given to a person for his/her own sake: its purpose is to help others, by guiding and building them up. In the case of religious authority, I suggest that it involves preaching a clear and correct message; offering fair and competent administration; and (last, but not least) making the Faith attractive. A tall order!

I shall briefly mention the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading here. Paul offers a beautiful hymn of praise about God’s ‘depth’ – his mysterious power and wisdom, of which we can only have glimpses. God is the source of all existence & life in the Universe; for me, the more we learn of the size and complexity of the Cosmos, the more we can appreciate the wonder of its Creator. Perhaps it is in this context that we should respect our human nature: so far, we are the only beings able to understand, value and alter (for good or ill) our environment. The human reason that lets us know of the Creator can, if misused, also destroy our planet.

Although the Church can offer us these great insights, it cannot alter (or abolish) other basic teachings – about moral behaviour - just because they are not popular in the 2020’s. There is a fine balance between not wishing to offend people whose lifestyles clash with traditional biblical & Christian teaching and saying that none of this matters any more. I write this, not just as a priest, but also as an ordinary Catholic who has adult relatives who, along with friends and older children, simply reject much of the RC sexual ethical system that was accepted until about 40 years ago. What should we do? In the moral sense, I know that living-together is not right morally; but they say: “Everyone does it, so what’s the problem?” I cannot honestly work out how to handle this issue.

For most young people, the authority of the peer-group (and society in general) is far greater than the authority of the Church. Pope Francis, every bishop (and any pastoral priest with common sense) each accepts that the Church’s moral authority, given in this Sunday’s gospel, has been severely dented by the child-abuse issue. Yet, without some serious Christian influence, what would society be like? While unwilling to live by the restraints of traditional RC sexual ethics, many young people accept the social and charitable teaching of the Church, and reject the consumerist obsession that has affected our society for years. So, in some areas, the authority of the Church and its biblical basis still have a real place in people’s lives. May God help Pope Francis and our new Bishop Stephen in their leadership roles. *Fr Jim Dunne.*

