

The text of today's gospel is, I am sure, very familiar to you, and I am sure you have heard many homilies on the confession of Peter's faith and Our Lord's entrustment to him of the keys of heaven. So precisely because of that, I am going to focus more today on the first reading from the prophet Isaiah. It is often said that we Catholics don't know the Bible – and if all we read are short snippets like today's, of course, that is inevitable. So let's put the first reading in context.

Isaiah tells us that Shebna, the Master of the palace – King Hezekiah's chancellor – was dismissed and replaced by Eliakim, the son of Hilkiyah. And Isaiah continues:

I place the key of the House of David on his shoulder;
should he open, no one shall close,
should he close, no one shall open.

Now what's all that about?

King Hezekiah was the son of Ahaz. Ahaz – a young king, he was only 20 when he came to the throne of the Southern Kingdom, that is, of Judah, and 36 when he died - had followed a policy of accepting the over-lordship of the Assyrians. He gained peace for Judah by paying a tax or tribute to Assyria. But he went further: travelling to Damascus, he pledged allegiance to Tiglath-Pileser, and worshipped the Assyrian gods. He had Assyrian artifacts set up in the temple in Jerusalem, and temples to the Assyrian gods set up in Judah. He even had one of his sons sacrificed to the god Moloch.

Perhaps seeing what happened to his brother, Hezekiah determined to follow a different path. When his father died, the Assyrian objects were removed from the temple – the cleansing took about two weeks – and Passover was celebrated with solemnity in Jerusalem in 716 BC with a solemnity not seen in a generation.

Hezekiah was helped by a perceived weakness in the Assyrians when Sargon – Tiglath-Pileser's son – died. The succession was always disputed in Assyria, and it was a little while before Sennacherib emerged as the undisputed successor of Sargon. And Hezekiah's chief advisor – the Chancellor, or Master of the palace – was Shebna. Shebna advised Hezekiah to shake off the Assyrian yoke, and to prepare for war. In particular, he oversaw the cutting of a tunnel from water sources outside Jerusalem into the city, to the pool of Siloam. The source was then covered up, and the tunnel – more than half a kilometre long – would supply the city in case of siege. An inscription, found in the tunnel in the nineteenth century, says that the builders worked from each end, finally meeting in the middle. It was an impressive feat.

The prophet Isaiah was delighted with Hezekiah's restoration of Jewish life and worship, and his rejection of the Assyrians, so you might have expected him to approve of Shebna, but clearly he did not. For one thing, Shebna was a foreigner, not a Jew. This made him suspect in Isaiah's eyes. And Shebna counselled Hezekiah to enter into an alliance with Egypt. For Isaiah, this would be just replacing one foreign dominance with another. Isaiah criticises Shebna's arrogance, building a conspicuous tomb for himself close to the tombs of the kings – archeologists have found Shebna's tomb, by the way – and predicts his downfall.

In the end, Shebna was deposed by Hezekiah. Why? Perhaps the response of Sennacherib is the reason. He laid siege to Jerusalem, and Hezekiah was forced to pay him tribute. A tablet found in the ruins of the royal palace in Damascus says Sennacherib received eight hundred silver coins; the Bible says Hezekiah paid three hundred. What's more, having received the money, Sennacherib broke his word and pressed on with the siege. All looked lost for Hezekiah. And suddenly the siege ended. Why? The Bible says that one hundred thousand of Sennacherib's men perished of plague. The Assyrian records don't mention the losses in the campaign. But both the Assyrian chronicles and the Bible report that Sennacherib was assassinated as he prayed, possibly by agents of the Babylonians, possibly by agents of his younger son: even ancient times had their conspiracy theorists. In any case, Judah was saved, and entered into a period of strength and independence under Hezekiah. Meanwhile the keys of the palace passed from the proud and vainglorious Shebna to Eliakim, a nobody, the son of a nobody, but a faithful Jew and not a cat's-paw of Egypt.

And this, of course, is why the Church has chosen this reading from Isaiah to accompany the confession of Peter's faith, and his commission to lead the Church, in today's gospel.

Isaiah's words: "I place the key of the House of David on his shoulder; should he open, no one shall close, should he close, no one shall open." are echoed by our Lord: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven: whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven." Peter is thus not only Christ's Viceroy here on Earth, but indeed is appointed the Master of the Heavenly Palace.

The famous words "You are Peter, and on this Rock I will build my Church" have been subject to much discussion over the years. Martin Luther understood Jesus to be saying that the "rock" was not Peter, but his confession of faith. Many Protestant commentators point to the fact that Peter is masculine (*Petros*) but rock is feminine (*petra*) in Greek – so

that they conclude that Jesus is making a distinction. But Jesus spoke Aramaic – and in everyday speech called Peter *Cephas* – “rock” – in Aramaic. In any case, those closest to Jesus in time, the early Fathers, all understood Jesus to say that the Church was founded on Peter, the Rock. Here is Tertullian, writing about 200 AD:

The Lord said to Peter, ‘On this rock I will build my Church, I have given you the keys of the kingdom of heaven [and] whatever you shall have bound or loosed on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven’ . . . What kind of man are you, subverting and changing what was the manifest intent of the Lord when he conferred this personally upon Peter? Upon *you*, he says, I will build my Church; and I will give to *you* the keys. (*Modesty* 21:9–10 [A.D. 220]).

And here is that great if controversial teacher at Alexandria, and later in Palestine, namely Origen, writing in the year 248:

Look at [Peter], the great foundation of the Church, that most solid of rocks, upon whom Christ built the Church. And what does our Lord say to him? ‘Oh you of little faith,’ he says, ‘why do you doubt?’ (*Homilies on Exodus* 5:4 [A.D. 248]).

That Peter’s ministry continued in the Church after his death is a matter for another homily: I would base that teaching more on the final chapter of John’s gospel than on this text, though both are relevant. Of course, Jesus does not say that Peter or his successors will be perfect leaders, or right in every opinion they express. This Peter, this “rock”, is the very one who will deny his Lord three times. He is the Peter that Paul will “oppose to his face, as he was manifestly in the wrong”, as we read in Galatians 2:11. But the Church would not be the Church Christ founded without him. More on that another time

St Dominic’s, Camberwell
23rd August, 2020