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The Twenty-first Sunday of the Year (A)

Today, Peter confesses Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" and Jesus gives him "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" with the power to "bind" and to "loose" (Matthew 16:16, 19-20).

To recognize Jesus as the Messiah is to acknowledge the truth of the words announced to Mary:

He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end (Luke 1:32-33).

Jesus' kingdom, then, is the Kingdom of David, Israel.

In the first reading the Lord says to Shebna, then Master of the Palace, "I will throw you down from your office" because he has become a "disgrace to [his] master's house" (Isaiah 22:19, 18).

The Master of the Palace was the highest official in the Kingdom of Israel. He served in the capacity of what might be called a Regent, a Prime Minister, or a Vizier, as Joseph was in the land of Egypt (cf. Genesis 41:40). There was no one above the Master of the Palace but the King himself.

The King entrusted his own authority to his Master of the Palace, which is why "when he opens, no one shall shut, when he

shuts, no one shall open" (Isaiah 22:22). The Master of the Palace acted in the name of the King and possessed the King's authority. To disobey him was to disobey the King.

The Lord God pulled Shebna down from his office as Master of the Palace (cf. Isaiah 22:19) because he looked to the Pharaoh of Egypt for deliverance from Sennacherib, King of Assyria. Shebna trusted in mere men and did not rely on the help of the Lord God; this is his disgrace.

Taking from Shebna his robe, his sash and his authority the Lord God entrusted them to Eliakim, making him the new Master of the Palace. The Lord further placed upon Eliakim "the key of the House of David" (Isaiah 22:22).

But what has this to do with Peter? Jesus himself told Pontius Pilate, "My kingdom does not belong to this world" (John 18:36). Yet, he sent the Apostles in his name, telling them to announce, "The kingdom of God is at hand for you" (Luke 10:9).

Yes, the kingdom of Jesus is not an earthly, temporal kingdom. It is an eternal kingdom, a kingdom without end, one not bound by time and place. His kingdom, his reign, extends beyond that of Israel.

The Lord first made his covenant with Israel to foreshadow the covenant he would make with all of humanity. In the fullness of time, the Son of God sealed "the new and everlasting covenant" with the new Israel in his own blood. Through his

appointment of the Twelve Apostles, Jesus makes clear that "the definitive time has arrived in which to constitute the new People of God, the people of the twelve tribes, which now becomes a universal people, his Church."¹ It is the Church, founded upon the rock of Peter, which is the new Israel.

We see, then, in this passage from Saint Matthew's Gospel, that Jesus uses three symbols regarding his Church:

Peter will be the *rocky foundation* on which he will build the edifice of the Church; he will have *the keys* of the Kingdom of Heaven to open or close it to people as he sees fit; lastly, he will be able to *bind* or to *loose*, in the sense of establishing or prohibiting whatever he deems necessary for the life of the Church. It is always Christ's Church, not Peter's.²

Peter did not make the Church; he received it from Christ Jesus. Peter did not create his faith; he received it from the Father. Peter is not free to do with the Church whatever he wishes, but only what is the will of the Lord. Peter is, as it were, not the King but the Master of the Palace; Peter speaks not in his own name, but in the name of Jesus Christ.

It was always thus with Peter and it has been thus with his successors, the Bishops of Rome, down to our present Holy Father, gloriously reigning, Pope Benedict XVI. As it is for the Popes, so it is for the Bishops and priests, as well. We speak not in our name, but in the name of Jesus Christ.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Wednesday Audience, 15 March 2006.

² *Ibid.*, 7 June 2006.

There is a valuable lesson for us in this: the Church is not ours to fashion as we wish, nor is the faith ours from which we can pick and choose. The Church is Christ's and the task of the Pope, together with the Bishops and their priests, is to preserve the Church and to hand on the faith received from the Father. We see this symbolized in the vestments a priest wears for the celebration of the Holy Mass. Just as the Master of Palace was clothed in robes and girded with a sash, so are the priests of the New Covenant (cf. Isaiah 22:21).

A priest first puts on an amice, a rectangular cloth that covers the collar of his shirt or cassock. It hides his "street clothes" and symbolizes the helmet of salvation (cf. Ephesians 6:17). It reminds him that what he is about is not ordinary and is far from routine.

A priest then puts on an alb, a long, white robe that covers his body from his neck to his feet. It symbolizes the garment first received in Baptism when each of the baptized is made a new creation and is welcomed into the life of the Church. When putting on the alb, the priest recalls that he, with all of the baptized, has been clothed in Christ (cf. Galatians 3:27).

Next he wraps a cincture around his waist, a rope, the symbol of celibacy, freely accepted for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.

He then places a stole around his neck, the symbol of his authority as a priest of Jesus Christ, as one who speaks in his name and acts in his person.

Over all these vestments he places the chasuble, the symbol of the love of Christ which is to cover all things (cf. Colossians 3:14).

All of these sacred vestments serve to depersonalize the priest; it is not the individual priest that matters, but Christ. By diminishing his personality we see not the individual priest but Christ, who is sacramentally present in him.

Through the sacred vestments we are reminded that it is not my Church or our Church, but Christ's Church, which he entrusted to Peter and to his successors. Let each of us, then, humbly look to the Successor of Saint Peter and hear in his voice the voice of Christ. Amen.