

“I place the key of the House of David on His shoulder.”
Isaiah 22:22

Have you ever noticed that right at the beginning of the Bible, in the Book of Genesis, a door slams shut, and that right at the end of the Bible, in the Book of the Apocalypse, it is opened again? After Adam committed the Original Sin he and Eve were driven from the Garden of Eden, the gates were clangd shut, and Cherubims were placed on guard to stop anyone from re-entering the garden (Gen 3:23-24). But in St John’s vision right at the end of the Bible he sees a door opened and he is shown the things of Heaven (Apoc 4:1). The doors to Paradise are closed upon Mankind because of sin, because of Man’s reluctance – Man’s refusal – to work *with* God, believing he is capable of securing his own happiness unaided. The whole of the Bible narrative between these two events provides us with the story of the consequences of sin, of God’s unfailing fidelity and mercy nonetheless, of God’s calling His people back tenderly to Himself, of the redemption, and of the unlocking once more at the end of the Bible of the door that was slammed shut at the beginning.

In today’s first reading from Isaiah we hear how Shebna, an unfaithful servant in charge of the household of Hezekiah, the King of Judah, has abused his position of authority and has that key taken from him and given to another. In the Gospel passage we hear how that same key is passed on to a faithful servant, St Peter, entrusted with the care and the guardianship of God’s household, the Church. The key represents the stewardship of all that God has revealed and all that God has entrusted to the care of the shepherds whom He has left in charge of His flock.

But the key represents even more than that. The key in ancient Judah was, historically, so large that it really was carried on the shoulder. And as soon as we picture anybody in the Bible carrying a great burden on his shoulder we think instantly, of course, of Christ carrying His Cross. But the image from today’s first reading also crops up in Advent.

In the last few days before Christmas we are treated to the great O Antiphons used at the *Magnificat* at Vespers and as the Alleluia verses before the Gospel at Mass too. One of those O Antiphons proclaims: *O clavis David!* “O key of David! Come and lead the captive from prison; free those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death”. And as soon as we hear *these* words in the Antiphon we are instantly reminded of the *Benedictus* in Luke’s Gospel which was sung at the birth of St John the Baptist. Here the reference is clearly to Christ. So the key represents not only the stewardship of God’s household, but also the Cross on Christ’s shoulder, and indeed Christ Himself.

But what is it that sin actually shuts us out from? And does sin really hold us captives and leave us sitting in darkness and in the shadows?

As we know perfectly well from the newspapers, there is a great deal of anger in today’s world. But the anger is not restricted to people in far off places. Many people experience feelings of impatience, or resentment, or anger, or jealousy. Many people feel themselves to be the subject of an injustice, perhaps feel that they have been made a victim, and perhaps, in turn, find it very difficult to forgive.

To live in a state of continual – or of recurring – resentment or jealousy or pain, of anxiety or fear or anger, to live in a state of feeling unable to forgive, *is* to live in a prison. These states of mind are the result of sin, either our own sins *or* sins committed by others against us, or, very often, a combination of the two. Sometimes we find ourselves unable to release ourselves from such states of mind, we can’t seem to put the resentment to one side, or to calm the anger, or to ease the anxiety or fear, or to assuage the jealousy, or to forgive. But perhaps we should not be surprised that we cannot heal ourselves of these conditions because, after all, we know that we cannot heal ourselves of sin and the effects of sin. Only God can bring such healing, only the gentle balm of grace can heal those wounds deep within our souls.

So long as we are suffering from any such condition as these we are effectively barred from the delights and the contentment and the peace of mind that comes with living in the presence of God; our sins and the sins of others have shut us out from that paradise. But Christ has the key – indeed Christ *is* the key – which will open for us once again the door to... to what? St Paul tells us in today's second reading: the door to the richness of the very depths of God Himself.

When Christ conquered death, when He rose from the dead and ascended back into Heaven, He opened for us the door to His Father's heart, a doorway closed by our refusal to find our happiness in Him, a doorway closed by our insistence that we could find happiness without God (which is, after all, the definition of sin).

By passing the stewardship of that household to St Peter and his successors within the Church, Our Lord has ensured that the door that we have so willfully closed upon ourselves and upon our neighbour is now made open to us through the sacraments, and especially through the Precious Blood poured out for us on the Cross and made available to us in the healing grace of Confession and the Holy Eucharist.

Christ has unlocked the door to heaven. He invites us to step through that doorway. We, each of us, can choose to do just that.

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