

As religious people, as Christians, and even more as Episcopalians being part of the Anglican Communion, we probably like to think of ourselves as people of tradition. Our roots deeply in the Scriptures, our branches unfold over two thousands years of history. Not only the history of the church, with all its peaks and pits, is important to us but also, and mainly, we love our spiritual heritage, the way we have received, interpreted and lived out the Gospel through the centuries. It's likely that most of us, most of the time, feel reassured and lifted up by tradition. As a stake to the tree we are, it gives us support and it gives us direction.

Yet sometimes, we also have to acknowledge that tradition can constrain our moves, or at least our thinking. And my guess is, the Gospel we have just heard today is one of those that is difficult to understand because of the weight of tradition associated with Peter. If you have ever visited the basilica in Rome, you may even have experienced this weight not only as a figure of speech, but even, almost, physically: Heavy stones and heavy marbles. And even when you get outside the church still the plaza encircles you with its dozens of statues all around, you have to raise up your eyes to the sky to finally catch your breath. This is my experience, at least. And so, as we listen to Peter's confession today, we may not want to forget that this is also with this tradition that we are dealing with.

As I was re-reading this passage, it took me an effort to realize that at the time all this is happening, Peter, of course, is not Peter yet. He has just been re-named. And it suddenly struck me how difficult it is to step back to be aware that when Jesus hands out the keys of the kingdom of heaven to Peter, Peter is not yet this giant statue of marble most of us have in our heads. Peter is Simon, the son of Jonah, the fisherman. And it may be worth stopping a little bit to ponder this mystery: Jesus is handing out the keys of the kingdom of heaven, not to a scribe, not to a rabbi, not to priest. Don't get it wrong, the expression *to bind and to loose* is a very specific and direct reference to the religious leaders' privileges. Yet, Jesus chooses to hand out the keys of the kingdom to Simon Peter, the fisherman, giving him authority on earth as in heaven. Not to a scribe, not to a rabbi.

What a scandal, what a scandal it is.

Of course, at the time, fishermen were not sinners *per se* like the well known tax collectors, but they were, you know, just ordinary people doing ordinary things. They were our taxi drivers and our waiters, our hair dressers and our gardeners, our cleaning staff, our Metro employees.

Yes, indeed, we need to step back to become aware that to one of them is given all authority.

And maybe this is where we often get it wrong with this Gospel. We think of this passage as instituting a tradition: the tradition of the church. And yes it's likely the beginning of the church, but mainly, but first, it is the tearing down of centuries of political and religious tradition. Because tradition, this is actually what Jesus and his disciples were dealing with on that day at Caesarea Philippi, as reported in Matthew's version. In fact, although the story of Peter's confession is told in the three synoptic Gospels, Matthew is the only one to set the scene in this city and it gives us a perspective we could easily overlook: tradition was heavy in Caesarea Philippi. Not only this site was named after the Emperor, who was also worshiped as a god, but it was also a high place of worship of the pagan gods, whose statues were all carved in different niches around. And this is in this very place of worship of all the pagan divinities - including the Emperor himself - that Jesus asks his disciples who they think the Son of God is.

Tricky.

Jesus is revealing in the public space, and yet whispering it as a secret to be kept, that all religious and political tradition is going to explode because of him. Jesus turns his back to religious and political powers, picks the fisherman and gives him all authority.

Hearing this passage I wonder about two things concerning power and spiritual authority. The first thing is what kind of spiritual authority do I see in people. Paul invites me today to not think too highly of myself and I wonder: if I can hand out a sandwich to a homeless or tip generously a waitress, how often is it that I consider them as a possible source of spiritual authority? How often do I think of myself as having to minister to others, instead of thinking that maybe they are already ministering to me? The second thing that weighs heavily on my mind, as I ponder this story, is power. I think of all the fishermen in the world who are robbed of their keys. Sometimes keys are not so much meant to open doors than they are used to deny access. When Jesus hands out the keys to Peter, he wants to bring back some balance in a world of injustice, giving to the poor the kingdom he has promised to them in the Sermon on the Mount, in this very same Gospel.

A few months ago, I visited the county jail. The chaplain was giving a tour to a group of volunteers, and so of course, as you can imagine, he had all the passes, an impressive stack of keys. Most of us in the group were quite nervous and tried to follow him as closely as possible so a door wouldn't lock right in front of us. But at some point the man stopped in a hallway, in the middle of the visit, and he said to us: I used to be here. I used to be here, locked in one of those cells. And today, I have the keys. I have the keys to the doors I was locked behind. He said: *God did that for me. You can't imagine what it is for me to be able to walk freely in my jail.*

I think he's right, we can't imagine how it must be like. And yet, God gave to this man an outward sign of a spiritual reality that is also true for all of us. Because Jesus wants all the prisoners that we are to have the keys. We are all poor and powerless people in front of God, if only we are willing to admit it and not hide behind false securities: social status, privileges, religious tradition. Maybe it's not so much the gates to the kingdom of God that need to be opened, maybe they're opened, maybe it's the gates of Hell and our own prisons we need to escape: sins, addictions, despair, low self-esteem. Sometimes it can even be a comfortable life we need to flee, a career that in the ends does not give us that much sense of purpose. In a world where we so often feel tired and empty, Jesus wants to bring meaning to our lives, which is maybe, more than happiness, what our hearts truly long for.

Because of course, the physical key is just a sign, the key is not a physical key, it never has been. It's a key of understanding. Peter, recognizing Jesus as the Son of God, suddenly decodes two thousands years of Scriptures. All suddenly makes so much sense to him and Peter does not need no political power or religious authority to tell him who God is or what to do with his life. The Son of God is standing right in front of him. Jesus is the key. As the disciples on that day in Caesarea, we want to know whom to trust and what to do with ourselves, but in the midst of the crowds and the business of the world all shouting a different name, it's nothing but a land of confusion. Yet, among all the statues of false gods staring at them on that day in the city, a miracle happens: Jesus picks the fisherman and the fisherman picks Jesus.

Peter, Petrus means the rock in Greek. You probably know that. One thing you may not know is that actually the city of Caesarea Philippi is itself built on a giant rock of 100 feet straight up and 500 feet wide. But Jesus does not really care for institutions and traditions made out of stones. Jesus chooses a rock of flesh and blood. The passage of Isaiah we have just read refers to the rock more as something barren than something strong or indestructible. Peter is made new but for the simple reason that Jesus chooses what is nothing, flesh and blood, poor empty tired people to build up the kingdom of God. What is important is not so much who we are than what the Father is speaking within us. This is what it means to be a church, each one of us witnesses of Jesus with our unique gifts and our unique life, as the reading from Paul beautifully reminds us. Our tradition is a tradition of flesh and blood revealed, illuminated and given meaning to by the Spirit.

Jesus picks Peter, Simon the son of Jonah, the fisherman, but still Jesus does not pick anyone on the street, the ones who think maybe he's John the Baptist, or maybe Elijah or Jeremiah and doesn't think much of it. Jesus picks the one who looks for him. He picks the one who has been listening and following. He picks the one who speaks up when all other remain silent. Jesus picks the one who cares, the one who loves him. This question: "Who do you say that I am?" is everything but a theological pop quiz. Ask your friends or your family who you are for them, you don't expect them to give you a description of yourself, your title, your diplomas, your functions. What you ask is what you mean to them. To this question: "Who am I for you?," "What do I mean to you?," Peter responds to Jesus: You are everything, you mean everything to me. And so, of course, indeed, everything is given to him. Amen.