

**Pentecost 15**  
**24/8/2008**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Exodus 1:8 – 2:10**  
**Ps 124**  
**Matthew 16:13-20**

### **The Keys of the Kingdom**

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Many people come to the church seeking Baptism expecting this to be a ceremony that marks **a rite of passage** and are sometimes surprised to find we have a different understanding. For us Baptism is **a rite of initiation** that places a person within the Christian community where the intention is they will ever more grow into the way of Christ. The old word “Christen” means “to make Christ’s” and signifies that as a consequence of Baptism a person has a new focus for their identity. From now on they belong to Christ and will be shaped by their relationship to him and the community that bears his name. The reading from the Gospel has within it some clues as to what this relationship could mean, not only for Stephen Michael, but for all who bear the name Christian.

The first clue is found in the reference to Caesarea Philippi, the place where Peter recognized Jesus as “*the Messiah, the Son of the Living God*”. In some parts of biblical tradition Caesarea Philippi is known as the place where divine mysteries are revealed. This is exactly what takes place when Peter answers Jesus’ question: “*Who do you say that I am?*” This is the first time in Matthew that one of the disciples names Jesus as the Messiah, the holy one of God. It translates into meaning that in Jesus Peter has recognised divine reality embodied in a life like ours. Jesus responds by calling him “blessed” not because he is smarter than the rest. Flesh and blood – normal human powers did not bring him this answer. Peter had been receptive to the Spirit, which had kindled his imagination. He was awakened to a new reality, which was that the long expected reign of God had broken into this world to offer us a new horizon of life. Peter will always be “blessed”, for he was the first among the disciples to have caught a glimpse of the in-breaking of the Kingdom, for which we still pray. Because of this Peter is named a foundational member of the church: the community of Jesus followers, and is given the keys to the Kingdom.

This is big stuff, in the face of which it is a total distraction to be concerned about whether or not this entitled Peter to become the first Bishop of Rome. What is of far more value, importance and relevance to us is what comes next. The church that is centred on Jesus Christ is filled with a power that is stronger than the gates of Hades. This old language means that the power available to the church is stronger than all that is opposed to God, including the powers of death. Can we even begin to imagine what this means?

But there is more. In Matthew Peter, and then the members of the Church are given the keys to this domain. The plain meaning is that community that has its foundation in the apostles has been gifted with the power to open the Kingdom for others. It has the knowledge, which enables others to have access to the fullness of God’s grace, the realm over which death has no sway. God has not only given the church this power,

God calls the church to exercise the keys to it, and promises to stand behind and ratify what the church says and does in respect to this charter.

This does not mean everything will work out idealistically and perfectly. Remember that Peter was the rock because he recognized Jesus as the Messiah. But ironically, in another part of the story, he refused to accept that the holy one would suffer. He had not yet grasped the fact that the holy one of God shares the life of the Creator God, which transcends the realm of death. For a time he became Peter the Stumbling block. Yet this did not remove him from the grace of God. Later he was able to respond to a new call, from the Risen Christ, and turned again to the path in which he began.

A text like this goes to the heart of the church's mission and ministry in the world. It makes it clear we are not just wetting a little boy's head today. We are engrafting him into the community of Christ, which God has called and sent into the world to open the Kingdom to others. This action is made possible by God's grace, and our response of faith. In Baptism we set a person in this way, and promise to do all that we can to enable them to grow into the fullness of this gift and take their place as a citizen of the Kingdom.

What do we expect to happen as a result? It really means that a person lives, knowing that the powers of life are greater than the power of death and will ultimately have the last word. This perspective affects everything. It makes it possible to live with hope, and because Kingdom people live from another sovereignty than those that rule the world, it allows us to live in freedom from the dark and oppressive forces that surround us. It is here there is a connection with the first reading. In a death dealing and oppressive context two midwives resisted the law of an evil king and worked to preserve life. Why did they do this? The key is to be found in the text, which tells us they "feared God." This does not mean they were afraid of God, it meant they were prepared "to let God be God". They allowed God's sovereignty, which contradicts the powers of death, to have first place in their decisions about life. God's gift to us in Jesus Christ places us in exactly the same position. And today as we share this sacrament and celebrate God's gift of life, we travel again through the story of God's love for the world, and renew our commitment to live, letting God be God: God who is for us, Jesus Christ. How lucky we are to belong to the community that has this knowledge. May God enable us to be faithful in using the keys to it, so that many will enter and come to know and see and live in the way of God's life giving purposes for the world. Amen.