

## Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 23, 2020

Back in 2011 Dr. Tim Gray, a Catholic Scripture scholar and author, gave a very pertinent talk on “Religionless Christianity” in which he addressed the phenomena of Christians who see the Church as unnecessary to their being a Christian; who see their faith as being about a “personal relationship” with Christ and not about “organized religion.”

Dr. Gray asks the question, “*Why did Jesus live?*” Christians are good at answering the question, “Why did Jesus die?” They immediately respond, “To save us from our sins.” But why did Jesus live? If we give the same answer – He lived in order to die for our sins – we reduce His entire earthly ministry to His death.

The truth is Jesus didn’t just live to die. If that was His sole aim then He could have accomplished that as a baby, when Herod wanted to kill Him. But Joseph was warned to flee to save Jesus from death (Mt. 2:13-14,16).

Some might object that He had to die as an adult. That doesn’t work either. At the beginning of His public ministry He so incensed His fellow townsfolk in Nazareth that they wanted to throw Him off the cliff. But He escaped through the crowds (Luke 4:16,28-30).

Others would counter that He needed to die in Jerusalem. But when Jesus was in Jerusalem and said, “*Before Abraham was, I am,*” they picked up rocks to stone Him, and He hid from them (John 8:57-59).

In fact, Jesus was constantly avoiding capture and death because, as Dr. Gray notes, “He has something to accomplish in His life *before* He dies.”

The first time Jesus actually speaks about His death is immediately following the interaction described in today’s Gospel. Jesus takes the disciples up to Caesarea

Philippi and asks them, *“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”* The people get it all wrong, just like many do today. But Peter confesses, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* Then Jesus proclaims, *“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church”* (Mt. 16:13-18).

Jesus now gives Peter the *“keys of the kingdom of heaven”* (16:19). Notice that Jesus associates the Church with His kingdom. Dr. Gray says they are synonymous in this account.

What is Jesus referring to with the “keys”?

Ever since the days of David, the king had what we would call a cabinet and a chief minister. In today's First Reading from Isaiah, God is taking away the office of chief minister from Shebna and giving it to Eliakim. Eliakim is then presented with *“the key of the house of David”* (22:22). The key is a symbol of authority by which the chief minister can rule in the king's name whenever the king is away or incapacitated.

As the king's representative Eliakim can *“open and no one shall shut; he shall shut and no one shall open”* (Isa. 22:22). Jesus says something very similar to Peter: *“Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”* (Mt. 16:19).

In both biblical accounts a person is being given authority to rule in the king's name. Eliakim to rule in the name of King Hezekiah, Peter to rule in the name of Jesus.

Jesus has just established Peter as His chief minister – His representative – for when He, the King, is no longer visibly with them. It is only after doing this that Jesus for the first time predicts His own passion and death. Now He is ready to die!

During His public ministry Jesus had constantly spoken in parables about “*the kingdom of heaven.*” He had gathered followers (disciples) around Himself and from them selected twelve to be His apostles. He then chooses one of them, Peter, to be His chief minister; thus establishing a succession of visible leadership until the return of the King.

So, when a Christian says that he loves Jesus but not the Church, it is as if he were saying he loves the King but wants nothing to do with His kingdom! But how can one be loyal to the King without being committed to His kingdom? How can one obey the King but reject the authority of the successors of His apostles and Chief Minister, the bishops and the Pope?

Dr. Gray reminds us that “Jesus believed in organized religion” and that “to love the Church is to love the kingdom; to love the Church is to love the King.”

Amen