

It's great to be home again, and I'd like to thank our staff, the visiting priests, and the volunteers who helped. Normally when I'm away I'm giving talks on the upcoming revised translation of the mass, but this time I participated in a conference of Societas Liturgica, about 200-250 liturgists from around the world who meet every other year. This is the eighth time I've gone, so I reconnected with some friends and met new ones. This year's theme was baptism, and the talk that struck me most was by Joris Geldhof, a young Belgian theologian, who spoke about baptism and postmodernity. He argued that today's culture values flexibility to the point of instability, and relativity more than meaning. He said baptism offers something that our culture needs – a central focus for a person's life, and a symbolic ritual that points to the God who gives meaning to us as we look to the future. It was an uplifting message to hear, affirming that we as a church are offering what society needs the most. We can help people discover the center and meaning of their lives, and it all begins with baptism.

Today's gospel tells about Peter, who made Christ the center of his life, and whom Christ appointed as the leader of his church. Peter eventually went to Rome where he preached, ministered and died a martyr. Catholic tradition regards him as the first in our line of popes, because Jesus gives Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven. This is where we get the popular image of Peter at the pearly gates. When you have keys to the house, the office or the car, you have authority and responsibility; Peter became responsible for the church through the words of Jesus.

In today's first reading from the Old Testament we meet another keeper of keys. But this master of the palace, Shebna, was losing his office, and in his place God installed Eliakim, who apparently was the last person on earth you would expect to be placed in charge of things. Isaiah gives the outgoing Shebna this message from God, "I will clothe [Eliakim] with your robe, and gird him with your sash, and give over to him your authority. . . I will place the key of the House of David on Eliakim's shoulder; when he opens, no one shall shut; when he shuts, no one shall open." You can hear the prophecy that foreshadows Peter, the last person on earth you would expect to be placed in charge of things, but there he is, able to fulfill his ministry because he received the job from Jesus, and he kept Christ as the center of his life.

This is why we use Psalm 138 today with the refrain, "Lord, your love is eternal; do not forsake the work of your hands." One verse from this song describes the kind of promotion that happened not only to the lowly Eliakim but also to Peter. Psalm 138 says, "The Lord is exalted, yet the lowly he sees." And for people who realize we need God's help to get through the locked gates of heaven, Psalm 138 prays, "do not forsake the work of your hands."

Through our baptism, Christ has essentially given us a set of keys as well – the keys of meaning for a culture that does not know its purpose. Baptism equips us to give an example to those who think that death is the end of it all, to challenge those who think that what happens to people is entirely random, and to remind those who have a disregard for religion that the God who made them has a love that is eternal; even if we forsake him, he does not forsake the work of his hands.