

## Bishop's Reflection – 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday

We are all familiar with opinion polls and many of our opinions and decisions are influenced by them. “If this is the prevailing thought of the day,” we reason, “maybe it is time that I conform my opinion accordingly.”

Jesus carries out his own opinion poll. He wants to know what people are saying about him. As can be expected, the popular opinion falls within a certain “accepted range”; he is a prophet of some sort, with the true nature of his prophetic ministry still up for debate.

“But who do you say that I am?” This question is a lot harder to answer. No longer able to draw on the comfort of what everyone else is saying, we need to come up with an answer that is truly reflective of his nature and his place in our lives. I am sure you could have heard a pin drop. No one wanted to be the first to offer an answer.

Peter is the first to speak. As on the mountain of transfiguration, he probably had no idea of the full meaning of his words. Drawing on an ancient title from the Old Testament, he identifies Jesus with the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of God, in the line of King David.

But Jesus gives greater meaning to his answer. By saying, “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven,” Jesus forces them to look at the literal value of what has been said. He is not Messiah and Son of God, in the metaphorical understanding of the terms, but according to their true divinely-held meaning. Jesus **is** Son of God.

Jesus is faithful to the Davidic nature of his kingship; he appoints a “Chief Steward” or “Master of the Household”, referred to in our First Reading from the prophet Isaiah. The Chief Steward was in charge of the keys of the King’s Palace and was responsible for all those entering and leaving the presence of the King. It was a role of monumental importance and power, for the Chief Steward was often left to decide who saw the King and who did not.

The transfer of power from one Chief Steward to the next, in our First Reading, was not a result of a peaceful transition. Shebna is roundly vilified by Isaiah for using his position to advance his own interest and to jeopardize the interest of the people. Isaiah is telling him that God will see to his downfall and will appoint a new Chief Steward in the person of Eliakim son of Hilkiah, who will be “a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem” and will advocate on behalf of the people. In appointing Simon Peter as Chief Steward of his kingdom, Jesus bestows on him “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” with the power to bind and loose on earth with the authority that rests in heaven.

This is no small thing, and together with the statement, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it,” forms a firm resolve on Jesus’ part to be present to his people in a real and substantial way. Peter and the Apostles are not to act independently of Christ, but in communion with him, serving as stewards of a household that is not theirs, but his. It should serve as no surprise, therefore, that all the parables dealing with the “stewards waiting for their masters return” are addressed to the Apostles and not to the crowds or even the religious authorities of the time.

The steward acts on behalf of his master in considering the interest of the people entrusted to his care. As such he is servant twice over. The same may be said of anyone with adult responsibilities, be it at home or in the wider community. Yes, there are keys, and it will involve some degree of power. But

with the keys come responsibility, and woe to any "Shebna" who would use them for their own selfish purposes.