

## **His Mercy and His Men - IV**

### ***What is the Office of the Keys?***

Some of us are not quite comfortable with authority. Particularly, most of us are not quite comfortable to have *others* have authority over *us*. Not only because we know how authority can be abused, but also, and at a much more fundamental level, because we are not quite comfortable to have others in a position to make judgements for us as to what is good and right, and what we should do. For we have learnt only too well the lie the evil one told our first parents, that we ourselves are the rightful judges and masters of good and evil; that we are alike to God.

Some of us, those of us who have a conscience, might be even less comfortable with exercising authority ourselves over others. With authority comes not only accountability, but also real responsibility. What if we are wrong in our judgements, and make others to do wrong?

Certainly, authority can be abused. And certainly, those in authority can go wrong. Matters of authority can become a real mess.

We heard a bit about that tonight. The Jews brought our Lord Jesus to Pilate because, under the law of the land at the time, they did not have the authority to put anyone to death. Not that they always seem to have cared too much about that. They had been about to put our our Lord Jesus Himself to death on previous occasions, when He had offended their religious sentiments. But that would be the Pharisees. The priests, though, were eager not to upset the Romans and lose their privileges and the right to maintain the Temple and the worship there. And it was their Temple Guard that had taken our Lord Jesus captive.

Pilate exercised his authority as raw power. He was not concerned with what was good and right as much as with what was expedient for himself. He had given up on what is truth. Immediately after having asked the question as to what is truth, he walked away; he just did not want any more trouble with the Jews. Nor did he want to be held accountable for what happened to our Lord Jesus, and so he tried to pass the responsibility for His fate on to Herod.

Herod was a capricious ruler. For him, his office and authority served to secure him a life in luxury. He was glad to have our Lord Jesus brought to him, not because he was in search of the truth, either, rather, he just wanted to see our Lord Jesus perform a sign, for Herod's entertainment.

And when our Lord Jesus turned out to be no fun, Herod treated Him with contempt and sent Him back to Pilate.

And once again, Pilate was left holding the bag of authority. Previously, he had tried to leave that with the Jews, also: *Take him yourselves, then, and judge him by your own law.* But the Jews had held him to his authority: *It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.* Yet, they still did not honour his authority, not really, rather, they insisted that he agree to their judgement, on the authority of their credibility: *If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you!*, they said, refusing to make their case before the one to whose authority they appealed. Matters of authority really can become a real mess.

This whole mess, however, was all by God's design. As we heard it that Holy Scripture states it: *This was to fulfil the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death He was going to die.*

The Son of God had to die by the means by which Roman authorities would put insurgents to death. He had to die hanged upon a tree, in order that it might be fulfilled, what He would later have His holy Apostle Paul write: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us - for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hanged upon a tree!"*

Even through human abuses of authority, God brings His good will about. And as we heard it tonight that our Lord Jesus said it, His Kingdom is not of this world. His Kingdom is one of eternal salvation for sinners. And as such, the authority Christ has given to His Church on earth is, as our Catechism says it, the authority *to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant.* As we also heard it tonight that He said it: *For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world: to bear witness to the Truth.* And the truth to which He had come to bear witness is that which He had previously spoken, that *God so loved the world that He gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but rather have eternal life, and that whoever believes in Him shall not be condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God.*

The authority He has given to His Church, and, more specifically, to your Pastor, is not an authority to give him power over you; rather, it is the authority He has given to him to speak His Truth to you, in order that, through your Pastor, He Himself might speak His Truth to you, for your salvation.

*Do you say this of your own accord, our Lord Jesus said to Pilate, as we heard it, or did others say it to you about me?* In these words were the implicit accusation that Pilate did not really know what he was talking about; that he was acting on the testimony of false witnesses, all for his own convenience.

On the other hand, when Pilate said to the Jews, as we also heard it: *Behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him; I will therefore punish and release him!*, he was speaking as a tyrant, entitled to act on his own wishes and whims. He could not be bothered. He was not going to bother to take the matter any further and do a thorough investigation. But in order not to be bothered, he was willing to throw them a bone by punishing an innocent man in order to get them to leave him alone.

It does not make matters any better that in doing so, he would buttress his credibility by referring to the authority of another tyrant, one who was not taking the matter seriously, either: *I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us.*

The authority of Pastors, though, is, in fact, the authority of Another. They are not free to judge for themselves. They can only forgive sins, or withhold forgiveness, at the command of God. It was when our Lord Jesus came to His Apostles, risen from the dead, after having suffered and died for the sin of all sinners, that He breathed on them and said: *Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.* He said this after He had Himself borne the judgement for all sin, who shall judge the living and the dead, after having won for Himself the right to judge whomever He will free from judgement and damnation unto eternal death.

Only therefore can His Pastors forgive the sins of sinners: because He has Himself paid the price and penalty for the sin of all sinners, and thus earned for all sinners full forgiveness for all sin. Therefore your Pastor knows that there is forgiveness also for your sin, whatever it may be: because all sin has been dealt with and done away with with the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Christ.

And only on the basis of His own Word and command can His Pastors withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent; because He Himself has said it, that: *whoever believes in Him shall not be condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God.*

Therefore His Pastors must withhold forgiveness from those who withhold themselves from the forgiveness He has brought about for them, in that they will not submit to His Word and will, and will not believe in Him.

And therefore His Pastors must withhold that assurance of salvation they have been authorised to give, with the word of forgiveness, from those who will not submit to His Word and will in the way they live and behave; those who insist on continuing to live in ungodliness and impurity; those who will not acknowledge as sin what He judges and condemns as sin, and insist on their own judgement, and their right to live in a manner contrary to His Word and will. For by doing so, they show that they are not of the faith. As He has had His holy Apostle John write it: *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the Truth is not in us.*

It is not that your Pastor necessarily knows what is in your innermost heart; nor is it that each and every Christian who struggles with some particular sin in his or her life is not a Christian, or in her heart and mind. It is not even that any Christian who dies before he or she has reached sufficient spiritual maturity to see the error of his or her ways on a specific point will be lost to the salvation of God and condemned to eternal death and damnation.

Ultimately, all sin is unbelief, that is true. But this does not mean that all who sin are not *also* believers, that no one who sins is a Christian, and a Christian is a person who does not sin. Again, *if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the Truth is not in us, remember?*

Nevertheless, refusing to repent of specific sin is poison to the faith; hardening our hearts to the Word of God causes faith to die in us.

Now, your Pastor might not know if that is where you are, yet, when you refuse to repent of your wrongdoings; but he does know that that is where it leads, the path you are on; and he knows what is written in the Letter to the Hebrews: *Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.* And so he also knows that it is his duty, for their salvation, to withhold the word of forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent, and the body and blood of Christ. He knows it to be his duty to make it clear to the unrepentant just how serious it is to withstand the Word and will of God to separate oneself from His love, for this very purpose that they may turn to Him again, and find life and salvation in Him.

O Christ our God, Lamb of God, who have borne, and take away, the sin of the world, have mercy upon us. *Amen.*