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## KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

WHEN the bishop, the wardens, Fr. Bright, Fr. Buechner and I came to the steps of the Parish House after my institution as rector, we found the way barred by a most elegant but also most unyielding ribbon, whose Gordian knot only gave way to the slashing of a blade wielded, most appropriately, by the vice-president of the Church Women of St. John's, Mrs. Edward Warner. When the women (as also the men) of St. John's do something, they do it well; as the rest of the evening's reception proved. The flowers, the food, the wine, were all (what higher compliment?) just as they should be in the Church of our ascended Lord, who deserves the best and finest that we have to offer; and who gives us a taste of his joy in return.

And liturgically also, we did offer him the best and finest: an evensong sung strongly and well by the choir; a sermon that punched straight to the point; the Scriptures read as if they were what they are, the Word of God; the flowers blazing away behind the altar – and best of all, a congregation unfazed by the blistering heat or the length of the service, doing its best to blow the roof off the Church with "Alleluia, Sing to Jesus", "At the Name of Jesus", "The Church's One Foundation", and "Onward Christian Soldiers". (Some of the visiting clergy looked like men caught in a high wind.) I could not have asked for a more auspicious institution.

At the core of the American Office of Institution are two simple ceremonies. Outside the altar rails the wardens present the new incumbent with the keys of the church; and then he is received by the bishop within the altar rails, and is presented with the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Canons of the General and Diocesan Convention. In these ceremonies the bishop and congregation acknowledge the priest as rector (the Latin word for 'ruler') of the parish, whose right and duty it is to govern the parish in accord with the laws of Christ for his Church. As the new rector says to his congregation: "I...promise to be a faithful shepherd over you."

In the older language of canon law, a rector is one charged with the 'cure of souls' in a particular parish, with authority in all matters of doctrine, discipline, and worship; and who for that purpose is granted 'real, actual, and corporal possession' of the church 'with all rights, privileges and emoluments thereto belonging.' (In pre-modern times, that meant, among other things, the tithes required by law.) In the 14th canon of the Episcopal Church it is given this blunt modern formulation: "The authority of and responsibility for the conduct of the

worship and the spiritual jurisdiction of the Parish are vested in the Rector... For the purposes of the office and for the full and free discharge of all functions and duties pertaining thereto, the Rector shall, at all times, be entitled to the use and control of the church and Parish buildings with the appurtenances and furniture thereof."

The extent of the authority conferred upon the rector of a parish can startle those who have thought of the office as if it were a kind of chaplaincy to a voluntary association, or (alternatively) as the manager of the local religious franchise outlet. And at first glance, it is somewhat startling, even to me! So let me be clear: nothing in this authority should be construed as taking away from the legitimate function of wardens and vestry (which at St. John's Church is in part established by civil law under the church's 1841 charter from the State of Georgia), nor of other organizations and associations in the parish. Whatever powers a rector is granted, are granted that he may be a pastor, a faithful shepherd to his people.

This is clear when we consider the origins of this office over a thousand years ago, when the parish system was first developing under the influence of the 11th century Investiture Controversy. What was at stake in that controversy (whose arcane details fill books of church history) was the freedom of the Church's ordained ministry to do its proper work without undue regard for, or pressure from, worldly powers. And that is the principle of the institution of rectors. (It is in some respects akin to the tenure granted university professors.) A parish priest is instituted as rector so that he may be free to do what he has been called to do, and which he has promised to do, without fear or favor, and without let or hindrance by parishioner, vestry, bishop, or church bureaucrat -- that he should be free to administer the doctrine, discipline, and sacraments of Christ as they have been set forth in the Scriptures and received by the Church in the Book of Common Prayer and Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. For in the final analysis he acts as the representative, not of bishop, convention, or synod; nor of wardens, vestry, or congregation, but of Christ, by whose authority he acts, for whom he must speak, and to whom he is finally accountable.

The keys he is given at institution recall, at a lower level (and are meant to serve) the 'power of the keys' conferred on him at his ordination as priest. "Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained" (BCP, p. 546, cf. John 20.23; Matthew 9.8). What one must remember is that in Scripture the keys are primarily images of stewardship (Isaiah 22.22). The one who has the keys is not the lord of the household, but his steward, and must use them in accord with his lord's will. The authority to administer Word and Sacraments that is conferred on a priest at his ordination, and to govern a parish, at his institution as rector, is startlingly great; but it is only the power of stewardship. "And it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful" (1 Cor. 4.2). It is not his arbitrary will, nor that of any other person, but the will of Christ, objectively and publicly set forth in Bible and Prayer Book, which he is to carry out.

So while nothing of the rector's authority should be construed as taking away from the legitimate functions of the wardens, vestry, and other organizations and officers in the congregation, it does qualify these other authorities. On the one hand, none of them may restrict or

invade his legitimate authority in things spiritual or temporal. On the other, all of them in their deliberations, decisions, and doings, must be open to his counsel and exhortation. In day-to-day terms, this is what is perhaps most important: that the officers and organizations in a parish should be open in communicating with the rector, and that they should be open to hear his counsel, and to consider their plans in light of it.

Amid all the multitudinous activities, opinions, and viewpoints at work inside and outside a parish, there is one whose duty it is to see that all these diverse elements cohere in a unified vision, and that the unity in which they cohere is that willed by Christ for his Church. And if, God willing, he is able to do this work, divine grace supplying all his many faults and weaknesses, then, God willing, all shall be just as it should be, in the Church of our ascended Lord, who deserves the best and finest that we have to offer; and who gives us a taste of his joy in return.

**The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar**

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