O Clavis

December 20th, 2020

4th Sunday of Advent/Christmas Sunday

*O Clavis David, et sceptrum domus Israel;  
qui aperis, et nemo claudit;  
claudis, et nemo aperit:  
veni, et educ vinctum de domo carceris,  
sedentem in tenebris, et umbra mortis.*

O Key of David and sceptre of the House of Israel;  
you open and no one can shut;  
you shut and no one can open:  
Come and lead the prisoners from the prison house,  
those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death

In the Book of Revelation, the Risen Christ is called both the Root of David (Revelation 5:1-5) and the Key of David, “who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens” (Revelation 3:7). In the last book of scripture, the king of kings says: “I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut” (Revelation 3:8). The opening of this door began with a message from an angel to a young woman, when Gabriel visited Mary, saying: “And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’” (Luke 1:31-33). Like John the Baptist, Mary is a sign that the time of salvation is come—as Isaiah had prophesied: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). Immanuel—God with us.

The key of David. One might well ask what it shuts and what it opens. In Revelation, only the Lamb may open the scroll, the book of time (Revelation 5). In the first, chapter, however, when the vision begins, the Son of Man appears to John to say that He has the keys of life and death: “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive for ever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades” (Revelation 1:17-18). *Do not be afraid.* The same words that the angel uses to greet Mary in the Annunciation. As terrifying as some of the imagery in Revelation may be, it is a book of hope that confirms the triumph of the good news. It affirms that Christ is indeed the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end: “the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (Revelation 1:8). The key of David has the keys to Death and Hades—that is good news! The keys belong to the Holy One—not to the Enemy, not to any fallible human, not to random cosmic forces, but to Christ alone. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 16:19). The desire of God is to give us the keys to heaven, the keys to salvation. When we juxtapose the keys to Death and Hades with the keys to the kingdom, an itinerary emerges from the symbolism. God has come to bring us out of the darkness and into the light; God has come to open up the prison, bring us out of that prison and bring us into freedom; God has come to bring us out of death and into eternal life.

Mary is a sign for us. A sign that we do not need to be afraid. That, like her, we can receive the Holy Spirit that God may live within us. The angel says to her: “‘Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.’” (Luke 1:28). While this has an immediate meaning specific to Mary’s role in giving birth to the Lord, it is also a sign for us. God has favoured us by sending Jesus; the Lord is with us. Advent and Christmas proclaim that we are favoured; the season proclaims that the Lord is with us. The angel also says: “For nothing will be impossible with God.’” (Luke 1:37). The narratives of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany are beautiful—there are angels, magi, shepherds, sheep—there are no stories in history to compare in beauty, spiritual depth and hope. Our desire sometimes is to secularize and tame the beauty of the season, however, by reducing the narratives to platitudes about being kind, giving, showing compassion and hospitality. Those are all wonderful virtues—obvious virtues—virtues the Christian is called to practice every season, every day of his or her life. And they do play a part in the narratives of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany, but that is not what the narratives are about at all. There were no fir trees and wrapped presents in the 1st Century stories. There were no charity drives or greeting cards. There was simply a woman giving birth to the Saviour of the human race.

Our history of existence is the greatest locked room mystery ever to be told. And the Key of David is the solution. Advent and Christmas are about the coming of God into our world to save us from all we do not know and understand, to save us from sin and death, to bring us to Him. To open doors in our labyrinth that we cannot open; to shut the doors that we cannot shut. Advent and Christmas are about who God is and how you will respond. They are about all of the signs that God has given and where they will lead. The apostle Paul once said to the Corinthians: “Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). There are road signs all over the earth. They do not ensure that travelers will yield or stop when they should. The road signs point to the reality of the landscape; they show the potential danger; they manifest the reality of the law—they do not determine the reality of what will take place in the intersections or on the highways. Otherwise we would never buy insurance. Signs are important—but if our faith is just symbolism, we are pathetic; we are liars. The plays of William Shakespeare are full of beautiful symbolism, and there are millions of people who have never read him who get along just fine without him. And while some lovers of Shakespeare may love his symbolism, and while it may have helped them gain some wisdom or insight into their lives, I guarantee that his symbolism never paid their bills, mended their broken relationships, granted them healing from sickness, or gained them access to eternal life. That is essentially the verdict of the apostle. I believe the apostle would have just as readily said that if there is no Incarnation—then we are also misrepresenting God and much to be pitied for our fake good news of fake joy. Mary is the sign for us that God will be God, a God who saves, and nothing is impossible for God.

In his sonnet, “O Clavis”, Malcolm Guite depicts the harsh reality of our existential prison and laments the ease with which we throw away the Key who unlocks our cages and sets us free:

Even in the darkness where I sit  
And huddle in the midst of misery  
I can remember freedom, but forget  
That every lock must answer to a key,  
That each dark clasp, sharp and intricate,  
Must find a counter-clasp to meet its guard,  
Particular, exact and intimate,  
The clutch and catch that meshes with its ward.  
I cry out for the key I threw away  
That turned and over turned with certain touch  
And with the lovely lifting of a latch  
Opened my darkness to the light of day.  
O come again, come quickly, set me free  
Cut to the quick to fit, the master key.

*Remember the freedom*. Advent is about God giving you salvation forever. It is a gift. The Key of David has opened the door of freedom through the message of the angel to Mary, through Mary carrying the Christ child in her womb, through Joseph trusting the angel to stay with Mary and protect her, through the tax census ordered by the Romans, through the journey to Bethlehem, through the vision of the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks, through their encounter with the Christ child, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. The gate of salvation is open to you today—will you enter it and wait hopefully? Christ has opened the door of your salvation. The world has no power over this; it cannot control it. It is between you and God. It is not dependent on your religious experience, your knowledge, your status, or your background; it does not require the permission of fashion or society, the word of experts, the approbation of friends, the reports of the news, the shifting standards of what is acceptable or reputable today. There was nothing reputable, or acceptable in the situation of Mary, a young woman of no means or status living under Roman oppression and Pharisaical law, awkwardly pregnant with the greatest threat to Herod and Caesar, with the greatest threat to Pharisees and Sadducees. You do not need permission from anyone to be saved. You do not need permission from anyone to be free. God has given the permission; God has granted the freedom. God has sent us the key. Mary is a powerful sign of how we ought to start thinking about existence. Before the annunciation we were lost in our prisons and waiting for nothing. Through the Incarnation, we receive the keys to the kingdom; we become those who wait like Mary for the coming of salvation. Christ came to open up the prisons, shut them behind us, and open up the heavens to us. If we learn anything from the angel and Mary today, let us learn to not be afraid, to remember that we are favoured by God and the Lord is with us, and that nothing is impossible for God. That, like Mary, we can respond in divine humility, in ecstasy, in the peace that passes understanding, saying with our whole lives, our very being to receive the love of God: “‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’” (Luke 1:38).

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sedentem in tenebris, et umbra mortis.*

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