

Keepers of the keys

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Aug. 19, 2011

A popular tale told in the Dominican Republic features a king who got it into his head that he would like to touch the moon. "Why not?" he asked himself. "I am king. What I want, I get. I want to touch the moon?" (*The Tower to the Moon*, William J. Bennett, ed., Simon and Schuster, 1995).

The next day the king called the best carpenters in the land and commissioned a tower to be built -- one tall enough to reach the moon.

Surprised, the chief carpenter tried to reason with the king, but the sovereign was adamant: "I want to touch the moon." Then, after the king refused to budge, the chief carpenter announced to the king that they had hatched a plan. But in order to realize it, he said, he needed every box in the kingdom.

"Let it be done!" cried the excited king. In compliance with his royal decree, people gathered boxes of every shape and size. Then the chief carpenter ordered all the boxes to be piled one on top of the other. But, of course, the tower wasn't high enough to reach the moon.

So the king sent out another decree: He ordered all the trees on the island to be chopped down and fashioned into boxes. When they all were stacked up, the chief carpenter offered to make the first climb, just to be on the safe side.

"This was my idea," barked the king. "The honor belongs to me!" So the king began climbing; higher and higher he went. He left the birds behind and broke through the clouds. At the very top, he stretched his hand out to touch the moon, but it was still a short distance away.

"One more box," he yelled down. "I need one more box!"

"We don't have anymore," shouted the carpenters. "You have to come down!"

"I won't!" shouted the king, and he stamped his feet so hard that the tower almost fell. "Listen," he said. "I know what to do. Take the first box from the bottom and bring it to the top!"

With no other choice except to obey the king's orders, the carpenters pulled out the bottom box. You don't need to be told what happened next.



Before we dismiss this tale as fantasy, we need only look around to see many, many

places in our world where dictators and despots hold sway. Having climbed to a place of power, these unworthy rulers have toppled the moral infrastructure they were meant to preserve and negated the peace and justice they were entrusted to uphold. This is not a purely political phenomenon, either. Many supposedly religious leaders have seemed intent on pressing their own interests at the expense of those entrusted to their care. Others have chosen to look the other way or even to obfuscate the truth when God's innocents were being abused or ill-served.

With such poor examples of leadership on such a large scale, we might be tempted to lose heart. But the ever-timely word of God reaches out to lift us up and to help all of us, both leaders and followers, to focus on the qualities we aspire to develop.

In the first reading, Isaiah speaks of Eliakim, called to replace Shebna, who had served poorly. God appointed Eliakim to lead as a father ? not like a despot who lords it over others, but like a parent who cares, corrects, protects and guides.

In the Gospel, the Matthean Jesus compares the leadership of Peter to a rock. A sure and solid foundation, an impregnable fortress, Peter was to be protector of the flock and the one through whom all could gain access (keys) to God and to goodness. Peter's authority derived from his relationship to Jesus and from his faith in Jesus as their anointed leader and savior.

Paul (second reading) proved himself to be so authentic and effective a leader that countless converts came to Christ through him. These mentors of old continue to teach us. As their words and experiences are repeated in our hearing, they remind us that those in authority are to be, first and foremost, servants who lead with love and by example. They will draw their strength from their relationship with God, and wisdom from their familiarity with God's graced word. They will need our willingness to speak the truth as we see it, our continuing cooperation, and our daily and prayerful support of their good efforts, all of which will help them persevere.

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