

.Peter and Paul, Apostles.

During the 7th century A.D. the many small kingdoms of England and Ireland had, by and large, been converted to Christianity, either by missionaries from the so-called Celtic church of Iona or by those from Rome. This had led to some problems about the practices of the two branches of Christianity, and in particular to the calendars of the two denominations which could lead to differing dates for Easter. The king of Northumbria, Oswiu and his queen, Eanfled, each supported differing practices which meant that, as one was celebrating Easter, the other was still fasting for Lent. This was a minor source of friction until Oswiu's son, sub-king of part of Northumbria and a follower of the Roman church, expelled the Ionian monks of Ripon and replaced them with some from Rome. The king decided that it was time to choose which practice should be followed in his kingdom and called a synod at Whitby to settle the matter. He would preside and make a final decision but would take no part in the ecclesiastical debate. Both sides sent eminent churchmen to put forward their arguments. The Ionian church based its arguments upon following the practices of St. John, similar to those of the Orthodox Church, whilst the Roman faction followed St. Peter. Having heard both sides of the argument, King Oswiu decided in favour of Rome. He was alleged to have said about his decision, "I found much to admire in the arguments of the Celtic adherence to St. John, but St. Peter was given the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven and I dare not endanger my immortal soul's place in that Kingdom by annoying St. Peter." The Synod of Whitby was important in the development of the English and Irish churches as it set a precedent for other kingdoms to choose Rome for their allegiance.

The passage of scripture from Matthew's gospel chosen for our Petertide reading includes the words that convinced King Oswiu. Jesus said, "I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you lock on earth will be locked on heaven, and whatever you open on earth will be opened in heaven." The keys to the Kingdom are not literal metal objects. Rather the keys of the kingdom are the teachings of Jesus. Those teachings, passed on to Peter and the other apostles, Peter first since he was first to recognise and express his faith in Jesus as the Messiah, were the keys which would open this knowledge to the world at large. Like the steward to a Roman household, Peter and the other apostles, were to be responsible for opening this knowledge, as steward opened the door to his

master's house for those who wished to come in. Peter certainly fulfilled the task assigned to him. On the day of Pentecost Peter's preaching opened the way for three thousand souls, he opened the door for the centurion and his household as the first Gentiles to accept the faith, and, at the Council of Jerusalem, when accused of consorting with these Gentiles bore witness to the events that led up to that occasion and to how the Holy Spirit fell on his listeners. As Peter said, "Since God gave these Gentiles the same gift he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to argue?" Thus Peter opened the faith of Christ to all who would accept it. The keys of the Kingdom of Heaven are to open it to all who accept Jesus as the Christ. As Christians today, we can take a part as stewards to the Kingdom by our words and actions, showing the value of our faith as Peter witnessed in his day.

Fr Alan Swanborough