

O Key of David...

What is a 'key'? Well, it depends who you ask, and where, and when.

In the world of music, a 'key' is a particular harmonic centre, a chosen point on the spectrum of available tones that, once identified, serves as the centre of gravity in a song, a sonata, a symphony; a centre departure from which creates tension and dissonance, and eventual return to which alone brings resolution and secures harmonious existence.

For those who enjoy puzzles or devour murder mysteries, a 'key' is that clue which, usually contrary to all appearances and expectations, unlocks the answer, enabling us to unravel the obscurity, and granting access to a meaning that might otherwise have remained hidden from the foundation of the world and forever.

Mostly, though, if we ask about a 'key' we have in mind something like this. [Holds up a large key, five inches long, attached to a piece of rope.] Or hopefully a bit smaller and more manageable. This is the key to the front door of the Rectory, a bit unwieldy perhaps, but reassuring in its solidity and bulk. And like all keys of this sort its purpose is twofold: to lock, and to unlock. To grant access to somewhere or someone, or to prevent it, keeping us out. Or, in other circumstances, keeping us in. Preventing us from leaving. Shackling us to somewhere we would really prefer not to be. Granting us release.

In Scripture the 'key of David' is, in the first instance, a key of just this sort. It was the key that unlocked the door to the royal palace in Jerusalem, and which secured it again when necessary. The 'key to the kingdom' we might say. Apparently it, too, was a bit unwieldy, an object that, as we hear in Isaiah 22, could not be slipped conveniently into a pocket or purse, but had to be attached to a rope and slung over the shoulder. Its size, perhaps, intended to indicate its importance as well as to prevent it ever getting lost. And the one who had the key was the king (even though he probably had someone else to carry it for him!) – the one with authority to lock and unlock not just the palace, but much else besides in the life of the nation.

When we hear about this same key again, later in Scripture, though, it is no longer a physical thing granting (or prohibiting) access to a building and all that that building stands for. Access to the kingdom has come to mean something

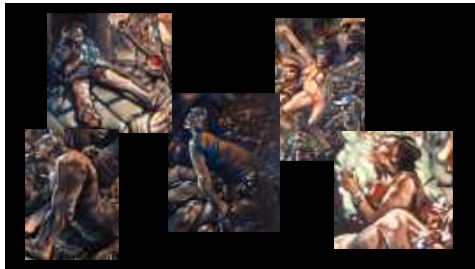
much deeper, much more ultimate than rubbing shoulders with human royalty. And the one who has the key, the authority to open so that no-one can shut, and to shut so that no-one can open is no political power or even a power behind the throne, but Jesus. And, as we read in the first chapter of the book of Revelation, the key that Jesus has and wields and (we might say) *is*, is actually the key to two quite different places. Or, perhaps, to the door that separates one place from another; securing the border between them; *granting access* to the one precisely as its opening *liberates us* from the other. 'Do not be afraid' says Jesus in John's vision in Revelation 1:17, 'I am the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I *have* the keys of Death and Hades'.

Jesus – the one who has conquered sin and death and the power of death – is the one who holds the key, the one who is the key. The key to the door on one side of which lies the kingdom of God for which we were made and intended; and on the other, the dark domain where sin and death and their power to bind and imprison and torture us still rule supreme.



Peter Howson's painting 'Hades III' is modelled identifiably on some familiar medieval and renaissance genres. Here, decked out in contemporary garb, is the tangled, writhing mass of human forms of Dante's *Inferno* and Giotto's frescoes of the promised Last Judgment. It's been said that hell is so much easier to imagine than heaven, precisely because life in this world already provides so much more rich material to work with. And Howson, who began his artistic career as a war artist in Bosnia in the 1990s, depicts a hell peopled by mobsters, prostitutes, rapists, murderers and their victims.

In all his paintings Howson is clearly fascinated by the human form; and his depictions of human 'flesh' are clearly laden with all the ambiguity attaching to that word.



We certainly find here no classical or renaissance idealizing of the human form as something naturally graceful, dignified, shot through visibly with the image and likeness of God.



Howson's work more widely gives the lie to the widespread assumption that in the world of art it is with something called 'beauty' that we are mostly concerned. Truth and reality here perhaps. But those are far from beautiful. This is flesh in all its ugliness and brutality. Flesh variously grotesque, exquisite, voluptuous, erotic, addicted, tortured, depraved, debauched, degraded, ... and despairing.



This is flesh subjected to an array of unthinkable sins and punishments (unthinkable, but not unimaginable, for imagine them, of course, is precisely

what such images have always encouraged us to do), flesh caught up in a veritable orgy of extreme pleasure and acute, unbearable suffering.



In fact, when we pay close attention, it is sometimes hard to determine here where the line between ecstasy and agony is to be drawn. Sometimes, perhaps, the painting suggests, the two are one and the same, or gradually transmogrify the one into one another.

It is difficult, too, to determine where the distinction between victim and perpetrator in this dreadful scene is to be drawn. Perhaps Howson wants us to struggle in this way, gesturing towards the possibility that, rather than the two clearly disentangled camps of medieval theology, the line between good and evil, sin and its punishment, is one that runs through each and every one of us, so that we have a foot planted securely in both camps? Because here, unlike Giotto's hell, the demonic does not come in the form of dreadful monsters.



All the forms here – those rudely illuminated in their commission of the deeds of darkness, and those still emerging from the shadows – are identifiably human. If this is indeed hell, then it is apparently a hell of human making as well as one of human suffering.

And into this domain of death and darkness, where sin binds and shackles both perpetrator and victim alike, keeping them (keeping *us*) out of God's presence where such atrocities have no place and cannot survive, comes Jesus.



A Jesus who, in the moment captured for us here, has seemingly just arrived, bursting into hell like a meteor (as one commentator puts it) and catching them all at it – the divine light and life emanating visibly from him illuminating, *revealing* the reality of sin and the suffering which is sin's punishment in all its foul diversity.



You can see the shock waves rippling out through the darkness from the impact of his arrival. But he comes not to destroy, but with the power to restore; not to lock the door and throw away the key, but to break the door open so that those trapped there will find release and relief.

Giotto's 'Last Judgment' on the west wall of the Arena Chapel in Padua is intended as a visible threat, intended quite literally to scare the hell out of people so that they may not actually end up going there. Howson suggests that it may be too late, because in some sense perhaps we already are.



For while none of us may find ourselves committing or subject to the extremities of human depravity represented for us here, these grotesque bodies serve, too, as symbols of the darkness of the human soul, the inner realm where far more of us have ventured, do venture, and will venture much further down that road than we ever shall 'in the flesh'. So, these dark, twisted and depraved forms are not meant to be someone else; they are us. And the good news is just as good, and just as needful for us as for them: "Do not be afraid. I am the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I *have* the keys of Death and Hades'.