

Peter is not only receiving the mark or badge of authority in this episode but also the mark or sign of the cross. Many years ago as Bishop Kevin was emerging from the chrism mass in Northampton a priest or deacon offered to relieve him of his crook or staff and Bishop Kevin was heard to mutter, ‘Here. You can take it. Only a fool would want to be a Bishop.’ The power Peter is receiving is not for himself only, indeed, it’s not for himself at all and it comes at a cost. He, of course, doesn’t realise this yet. Does any one of us realise the cost of being a Christian, whether we are called to a position of authority or not? Indeed, the cost is there for all of us – and the authority, too. We can give away the crook or staff but the cost and authority remain. What is this cost? Well, the list is quite long – indeed, it is everything, as we heard our founding saint, Bernard Tolomei, say on Wednesday with alarming simplicity, in his advice to Dom Pietro:

My Brother, give what you have, yourself and everything.

We are, in effect, surrendering authority over our own lives and giving it entirely into the hands of another. You may think this is a monk’s privilege only, but it’s for us all. What we monks do, or seemingly do, is a mark or sign of the true state of us all – Christians or not. For what such surrendering signifies is a recognition of our true status before God, as creatures made and sustained in the image of God. ‘Whose life is it anyway?’ one might ask. And this gives each one of us great authority; the power to bind or to loose; to keep others in their servitude to sin or to bring them into the freedom of the children of God. It’s there in the next word we speak, or the next look we give or don’t give. Granted there are degrees of authority in any group but, for Christians, this is given only to ensure the freedom and dignity of every other member of the group; a group that ultimately extends to every other human being and indeed all created being; all that God brings into being. In this sense we are here as sustainers; which is why it remains our responsibility when the poor are neglected and the earth cries out for justice; when the Church is seen as a refuge only for some instead of, as Pope Francis famously said, a ‘field hospital’ for all. In the reading from Isaiah, Shebna , King Hezekiah’s Chief of Staff, is dismissed for building himself an impressive tomb. We need to be careful that we’re not doing the same. Welcome to the field hospital.

Br John Mayhead
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour