

**Proper 16, Ordinary 21A**  
**Binding and Loosing**  
**Romans 12.1-8 | Matthew 16.13-20**

Today's Gospel text comes with a warning – a warning that depends on us knowing the next part of the story, which we'll read next Sunday. So we'll very quickly look ahead. The verses that follow today's reading have Jesus speaking of his coming suffering and death at the hands of the authorities, and Peter taking him aside to have a quiet word. "No Jesus, this isn't supposed to happen to you, stop talking about being killed, that's scary and wrong. Please can you come up with a different plan where you survive and I get to be the rock and we all win, with thrones."

Jesus' response to Peter is to say "get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Strong language to the person he's just affirmed as holding the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And then he goes on to tell the disciples that they're all going to have to follow in his footsteps, to take up their cross and walk a path of sacrifice, because this is the essence of discipleship.

So the warning that accompanies today's reading is that confessing Jesus as the Messiah doesn't mean winning. There is nothing triumphant, militant, or powerful in any worldly sense about being the church. The church will be victorious against the gates of Hades – the forces of death and destruction – but not through the exercise of human might.

Of course the church through the ages, intoxicated by the concept of having the keys to the kingdom has continually fallen into the trap of wielding this power through forms of institutional domination. That's why Peter needs the shock of his bright idea for Jesus to avoid the way of suffering being rejected as demonic. It is through the cross, through non-violent love, that the kingdom of heaven is revealed in this world. When the church acts otherwise we manifest the destructive agenda of the evil one, not God.

So that's the warning. Keep it in mind as we ponder what it could possibly mean for those who confess Jesus to "bind" and "loose" things on earth and in heaven.

Here's how I understand it. The role of the church is to participate with God in the healing of God's good creation, including human society. This means returning a fallen human culture back to its God-given purposes. It means recalling the systems, organisations and powers of the world to their proper intention - what they're meant to be and do – starting with our own church institutions.

Now, this can sound really pompous and grandiose. How could our tiny congregations, our irrelevant and invisible parish churches, our weak efforts at discipleship, transform anything in this world, let alone the powers that shape human life and flourishing – or un-flourishing?

Well, this is where the binding and loosing comes in, and it helps to see "heaven" as Jesus uses it here not as a place "up there" or "out there," but as the spiritual atmosphere, the interior dimension, of all that is. When a person, a group or an organisation is influenced to fulfil their good and proper purpose, a spiritual transformation takes place in the unseen world that shapes minds, hearts and wills.

So when one positive, tangible shift takes place in the decision-making of, say, a board of trustees, or the dominant person in a household, or in the behaviour of a prison guard, or in a law that gets passed...that doesn't just affect the outward, measurable functioning of the school, or family or prison or society, it also affects culture, well-being, and the mental and emotional freedom of everyone who's tied into that system. Instead of the powers of Sin, Death and Slavery running the show, there is room for love, growth and healing.

Binding and Loosing – these are metaphors that speak of what people say no to, and what we say yes to, and the spiritual knock-on effects of those no's and yeses.

And it seems that all human institutions have this gravitational pull towards saying yes to things that lead to hatred and destruction, and saying no to the things that God desires. This is the human predicament – we are tempted and deceived into hurting and harming, even, perhaps especially, when we think we are building something good.

What I think Jesus is saying is that God *amplifies the spiritual power of the “yes” and “no” of the church*. The church is given the keys to binding and loosing not because our institutions are perfect – of course they’re not – but because we have been gifted the revelation of Jesus Christ – the presence of God in a grace-and-truth-filled human life, who was willing to die rather than dominate in rescuing humanity.

And we have been gifted the grace of the Holy Spirit, to renew and transform our hearts and minds through prayer to discern God’s will.

That means when we, the church, in prayer, in faithful living, in loving action, say yes and no in accordance with God’s will, the power of God’s Spirit breathes through our small choices to bring about big changes in the unseen realm where spiritual powers are redeemed and returned to their holy purpose in God’s creation.

We have no way of knowing which tiny, hidden works of mercy and obedience will unleash a torrent of cultural and spiritual transformation – like a pebble starting an avalanche. And that’s why we can’t, as individuals, or as a small parish, say that this work belongs to someone else, or to the “church at large.”

Like sparks that spread through stubble, or drops of rain that accumulate to become a deluge, our task is simply to be faithful and as energetic as we can be in the expression of our yes and our no, in the name of Christ. While always holding on to that warning that sometimes it is *we* who need to be recalled to God’s will, *we* who have been deceived into a way of being that rejects the vulnerability of the cross.

St Paul reminds us that not only are we to avoid being “conformed to this age” in the offering of our lives to God, but that we do this as a body with differing gifts. Some people will write books or create video content that goes viral. Some people will go into politics, others will write letters to politicians or newspapers. Some people will create music that inspires other people to remember to be kind to the person serving them at the supermarket. Some will create movements, some will serve tea. Some will research cures for horrible diseases, others will pray beside hospital beds. Yet others will never leave their room, but will lift up the world before God, praying constantly that those hidden ones who carry crucial burdens will be upheld in strength and perseverance, and meet with angels on their way.

Every time one of God’s children says yes or no in accordance with God’s “good, acceptable and perfect will,” something is held back or set free in the realm where goodness and wickedness battle it out for the soul of creation.

What is required of us is to keep offering ourselves to God, to be alert to the gifts we express within the body of the church, and to be discerning and prayerful about where we lend our physical, mental or spiritual energy. Each day we bump up against other people, and with powerful systems that cause either flourishing or bondage – whether bureaucracy, media, retail, technology, education, health and so on. Our discerning choices, and the way we name dynamics and relate to people day by day, are part of how God is healing the world, whether that’s visible to us or not.

May God give us the grace to take up the keys of the kingdom as living sacrifices, accepting the way of the cross, and finding our courage in knowing that the gates of hell have already been dissolved into dust.

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