

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 27 Aug 2023

**Romans 12:1-8**

1 So then, my friends, because of God's great mercy to us I appeal to you: Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship that you should offer. 2 Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God - what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect. 3 And because of God's gracious gift to me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you should. Instead, be modest in your thinking, and judge yourself according to the amount of faith that God has given you. 4 We have many parts in the one body, and all these parts have different functions. 5 In the same way, though we are many, we are one body in union with Christ, and we are all joined to each other as different parts of one body. 6 So we are to use our different gifts in accordance with the grace that God has given us. If our gift is to speak God's message, we should do it according to the faith that we have; 7 if it is to serve, we should serve; if it is to teach, we should teach; 8 if it is to encourage others, we should do so. Whoever shares with others should do it generously; whoever has authority should work hard; whoever shows kindness to others should do it cheerfully.

**Matthew 16:13-20**

13 Jesus went to the territory near the town of Caesarea Philippi, where he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" 14 "Some say John the Baptist," they answered. "Others say Elijah, while others say Jeremiah or some other prophet." 15 "What about you?" he asked them. "Who do you say I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17 "Good for you, Simon son of John!" answered Jesus. "For this truth did not come to you from any human being, but it was given to you directly by my Father in heaven. 18 And so I tell you, Peter: you are a rock, and on this rock foundation I will build my church, and not even death will ever be able to overcome it. 19 I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven; what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven." 20 Then Jesus ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

**Focus: Holding the keys of the kingdom of heaven**

**Function:** To help listeners understand that as believers of Christ, we are given the keys and we ought to live out our responsibility.

So far, in the Gospel of Matthew, we have heard these confessions of Jesus's identity: "Sir," and "Teacher" (12:38) are the most common, then "Lord" (8:25, 14:28). And also "The Son of David," used by two blind men (9:27) and the Canaanite woman (15:22) in begging for mercy and healing. "This is my own dear Son," the voice from heaven proclaimed at his baptism (3:17). And lastly "The Son of God" spoken by the demons in the two possessed men in the region of Gadara (8:29), and also by the amazed disciples upon seeing Jesus walked on water and calmed the storm (14:33).

And interestingly, when they were near the town of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" While some thought he was John the Baptist, others Elijah or Jeremiah, Jesus was more interested to know the disciple's thinking. "What about you?" he asked them. "Who do you say I am?" And Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Could Simon Peter come to this realisation and hence make this confession that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God because he understood Jesus's ministry and teaching and the responses of people who had experienced God's grace through Jesus? Perhaps so, but he was constantly missing the mark and often talked before careful thought. Immediately after this account, when Jesus revealed to the disciples that he would soon suffer, be put to death, and rise again three days later, Peter rebuked Jesus for such nonsensical ideas. Responding to that, Jesus called him "Satan" for setting his mind on human instead of divine things (16:23). And much later when Jesus was taken to trial, Peter denied him three times (26:69-75).

Nevertheless, in this account, Peter answered correctly. Although it might be Peter's experience of Jesus in his ministry and teaching that he came to this realisation, Jesus directed the focus onto God, saying, "For this truth did not come to you from any human being, but it was given to you directly by my Father in heaven." So, it was God's revelation that inspired him to confess Jesus's identity. And this in turn assured the disciples of their faith in Jesus, the faith that enabled them, and is enabling us, to perceive and respond to the hidden nature of the kingdom of heaven in Jesus's ministry and teaching.

Then Jesus told Peter, "You are a rock, and on this rock foundation I will build my church, and not even death will ever be able to overcome it." Let us not be mistaken that Peter has been given the role of the head of the Church. The rock that is mentioned twice does not refer to the same thing and does not all refer to Peter. The first rock is Peter, or *petros* in Greek because that's what it means (see Jn 1:42). The second rock is *petra* in Greek, which is larger than *petros*; hence we have it translated as a rock foundation, or perhaps bedrock. Moreover, Jesus didn't tell Peter, "On you, I will build my church ..." but instead, "On this *petra* I will build my church ..." So, if it wasn't Peter, then what is this rock foundation on which the church would be built?

I believe that it has much to do with the answer to Jesus's question, "Who do you say I am?" When Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," he was testifying that he had experienced in Jesus his messiahship that he is the one whom God sent to be the gateway into the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, Peter's testimony – the confession of Jesus's identity – is the rock foundation on which the church would be built.

As a modern-day church, how are we responding to Jesus's question, "Who do you say I am?" Or perhaps Jesus's question is rephrased this way: "What is your experience of God through my presence and witness? What is your testimony of me?"

What will be our reply?

Hopefully, and it is indeed my prayer that our reply is the same as Simon Peter's, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

In paragraph 3 of our Basis of Union, we confess "that the faith and unity of the ... Church are built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ. The Church preaches Christ the risen crucified One and confesses him as Lord to the glory of God the Father. In Jesus Christ "God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19 RSV). In love for the world, God gave the Son to take away the world's sin. ... The Church, as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life; it also confesses that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity." Do you share this confession of faith? I hope that this is our conviction now, or soon.

Having said that, let us not assume that we must be competent in knowing God's Word or having solid faith before we are worthy to make this confession of faith. It is a life-long journey of discipleship for us. There might be times in life when we behave like Peter, weak in faith as we are faced with crises, that is why we need the Holy Spirit to guide and help us at all times.

Our discipleship is to follow and imitate Christ in our being, life, work and ministry to reach out to and help people in need, love and care, and let them experience the loving grace of God. And we do so with our experience of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, fuelled by our understanding of God's Word. However, the core of our discipleship ought to be our understanding of Jesus's identity, on which our faith is established. Without this, we will merely be a charity community.

That is why we hear Jesus telling Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven." However, let us not be mistaken that Peter alone was given such authority as the head of the Church, but rather, he

was named to receive this authorisation on behalf of the rest of the disciples and us. Two chapters later, in Matthew 18:18, Jesus said the same to all the disciples, “And so I tell all of you: what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.”

Just as any key locks and unlocks the entry to a property, were Peter and the other disciples now given the authority to close and open the kingdom of heaven to people? What are these keys of the kingdom of heaven? What were Peter and the disciples asked to prohibit and permit on earth?

The original Greek texts have the meanings of ‘binding’ and ‘loosing’ instead of our current translation of ‘prohibiting’ and ‘permitting’. This language of binding and loosing lies in the rabbinic tradition of the interpretation of the Law. And for Matthew, Jesus is the true interpretation of the Law with the authority of God; he has the authority to bind or loose any conduct. Indeed, Matthew 5-6 shows us Jesus’s teaching on anger, divorce, charity, fasting, and so on.

Therefore, as a church, we are given the keys – the authority – to teach in Jesus’s name and to interpret the kingdom of heaven to the world. We continue to bind and loose as we read, interpret and apply the Scripture, which is the living Word of God, to new situations and challenges in the current era as inspired by the Holy Spirit. This is the role of the church besides our ministry in social justice and concern.

Paragraph 3 of our Basis of Union also aptly declares, “The Church's call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself.”

So, is this who we are? Are we living out this declaration? Indeed, through our life and work in serving, witnessing and sharing Christ, we can make access to the kingdom of heaven available or unavailable to people.

Today’s first reading from Romans 12 incites us to live out our discipleship “as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him – the true worship that we offer to God. Therefore, as we let God transform us inwardly with a complete change of heart to be like Christ’s, and as one body in union with Christ, let us use our different gifts to serve God’s will among people.

Therefore, as we hold on to the keys of the kingdom of heaven, may our faith be firmly grounded in Christ, confessing him as the Messiah and the Son of God. May we actively be Christ’s missionaries to extend God’s love and grace as we reach out to and help people in need, helping them experience the kingdom of heaven as we share the good news of Christ. Amen.