

# **St. Mary's Sermons**

Date of Sermon: 16<sup>th</sup> February 2020

Matthew 16:13-20 keys of the kingdom

This morning's reading is Matthew's account of a crucial moment in the ministry of Jesus, which marks an important step change in his relationship with the twelve disciples. It has been almost three years since Jesus first called them to follow him. In that time they have heard him teach the crowds and have witnessed first-hand his amazing miracles but the key question that Jesus wanted them to answer was, did they know who he really was?

Matthew tells us that this incident occurred when they were in Caesarea Philippi, a remote district away from the politically sensitive area surrounding Jerusalem, where any talk of Jesus being the messiah could easily have been misunderstood, with potentially serious implications. Importantly, this gave Jesus the opportunity to try to teach them what it really meant for him to be the Messiah, before the crowd were able to whip up false expectations.

Jesus begins by asking them who the crowd said that he was. Their answer seems to suggest that the people perceived him to be God's spokesman: after all, in biblical times, that was the primary role of the prophets. But then he goes on to make it personal, but what about you, who do you, say that I am? It is then that Peter comes out with the wonderful declaration that he was the messiah, the son of the living God.

Tom Wright warns us against assuming that at this stage Peter had a good understanding, as we do today, of what it meant for Jesus to be the son of the living God. It is only much later that a clearer understanding of Jesus as the divine second person of the trinity is developed. Wright suggests that instead he would rather have had an understanding based on his knowledge of our Old Testament. In other words he would have envisaged the role of the messiah to be more in

terms of a political king, in the likeness of the nation's hero David. Hence the reason why in the very next section of the gospel when Jesus began to clearly spell out his understanding of what it really meant in practice for him to be the Messiah - that he must suffer and die at the hands of religious leaders, Peter rebuked him and was very firmly put in his place by Jesus.

Having heard from Peter who he thought Jesus was, Jesus immediately turns the tables back onto Peter and goes on to reveal his understanding of who Peter was: the rock, the foundation, on which he was going to build his church.

Well I'm sure that is all very familiar stuff, which most of you have heard many times before. What I found really interesting and what I want to concentrate on this morning is what Jesus said next, in verse 19. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven, what you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth will be loose in heaven. While I was of course vaguely familiar with this verse I must admit that whenever I have read this verse previously I had always simply skipped over it and had never really stopped to consider the implications of what it means, either for Peter, or for us today.

Jesus initially addressed these words to Peter. On the rock-like faith Peter has just displayed, Jesus is going to build his church. Now that he knows who Jesus is Peter is in the position to be given the keys of the kingdom. Following Jesus ascension back to heaven, we see Peter using this authority in several practical ways. So for example, on the day of Pentecost, Peter's sermon opened the door for 3,000 people to be added to the kingdom. And in Acts ten he

opened the door for the Gentile centurion, Cornelius, and thereby to the whole Gentile world, including us, to be welcomed in as well.

But it is not only Peter who is given the keys of the kingdom. Later on, in Matthew 18:18, Jesus gives the disciples a similar authority: 'I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven'

This is the extraordinary responsibility and privilege that Jesus gave his disciples and subsequently gives to us, his church today. He gives us the keys of the kingdom. This is how Eugene Peterson in the message interprets verse 19, 'you will have complete and free access to God's kingdom, keys to open any and every door: no more barriers between heaven and earth, earth and heaven. A yes on earth, is a yes in heaven. A no on earth, is a no in heaven'

Jesus says, in effect, that the powers of hell will 'not overcome' the person who has faith in him (v.18). Rather, the church, armed with the keys of the kingdom, can storm the gates of hell and set the prisoners free. The 'gates of Hades' will not hold out against the church. Gates are defensive, not offensive, it is the church that is on the offensive and you can be assured of victory against the defences of the enemy.

As Followers of Jesus we can have the amazing privilege of seeing people set free through the preaching of the good news of the kingdom. You can have the joy of seeing people set free from drug addiction, alcoholism, crime and every other bondage. WE can approach all the challenges of life with confidence, fearing no evil, knowing that we share in a remarkable spiritual authority.

As I was preparing this talk I was reminded of the part in the induction service when the archdeacon gives the new incumbent the keys to the church. I always thought this was just a lovely symbolic act but I now realise that it is much more than this. It is a sign of the authority given to me by God as the leader of his people the church.

Our failure to grasp the implications of the amazing privilege that we have been given and use effectively this God given tool has sadly led the church today to frequently miss out on the blessings that God has for us to enjoy. We have settled for second best, a weak and watered-down version of the faith. At times I have felt pretty powerless when confronted with different situations. No wonder people have voted with their feet and that church attendance in this country is as low as it has ever been!

It is time for us to reclaim this wonderful promise and begin to use our authority once again.

I believe all this ties in very nicely with our lent course – the blessing course. Over the course of the next few weeks we will learn about the power of blessing and how we can release God's blessing into the lives of other people. I would strongly encourage as many of you as possible can to come along on a Wednesday evening.