



Matthew 16:13-19

David Holwick tells a story I find great resonance with from my boyhood. He says *“growing up on the Atlantic Coast, I spent long hours working on intricate sand castles; whole cities would appear beneath my hands. One year, for several days in a row, I was accosted by bullies who smashed my creations. Finally I tried an experiment: I placed cinder blocks, rocks, and chunks of concrete in the base of my castles. Then I built the sand kingdoms on top of the rocks. When the local toughs appeared (and I disappeared), their bare feet suddenly met their match.”*

We saw this morning how that the church is built on the rock – and that rock is Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Church is a God appointed place we are all called to without exception. Jesus says two things in this passage about what church **should be**.

First of all, it should be a safe place. The rock as I said this morning is a great picture of God from the Old Testament. Forts were always built in high places – which served as vantage points and strong points. Rocks were safe places when storms and floods came. And the church of God is based on the rock, the fortress that is Christ.

Jesus says this of it: *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 - Jesus said that the gates of hades shall not prevail against it.* The use of hades here could mean either death or hell – you pay your money and make your choice – but what is clear therefore is that because the church is based on the rock that is Jesus who has conquered death means that the church is a place where people should find life and hope. Whatever the weakness of the church we’ll find in a later week that one day, the church, the bride of Christ is going to be presented as a glorious bride for the bridegroom that is Christ. It does have a great future.

The problem is that now church can so often be a hurting place and not a safe one. Rather than Christians being drawn closer to Christ and to one another, they can get discouraged and even driven away by other believers. Hopefully they find another church but there are so many we come across these days who once ran well but never meet any more with God’s people. We often like to blame them because of problems they had – but I and you know well enough that churches can be truly horrible places.

As we come to communion this evening, let’s pray two things as a church – firstly repent for when that has happened here – and we know it has. And secondly, let’s pray that the Lord will show us those things and those attitudes that put people off now, that we may more perfectly worship Him and reflect Jesus in our lives. The more like the rock we are, the safer and more attractive a place MRBC comes to both those who follow Jesus and those who we seek to get back and those we seek to accept Christ.

The second point I’d like to make from this passage is that the Church isn’t just a place of safety, but **it’s a place of power**. Let’s look at these words again: *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.* Again, the Catholics believe these words were uttered to Peter alone and therefore it applies to his direct successors alone – the Pope. The context of this passage however suggests that Jesus was addressing all of His disciples at this point – indeed if you go to chapter 18 you find almost the same sentiments in verse *18 And I tell you this--whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven, and whatever you free on earth*

will be freed in heaven. This was in connection with disputes between people in the context of church. As it's general it applies therefore to any disciples of Jesus, not just Peter or the apostles. It's an amazing statement: 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." A strange passage maybe? Let's try to unpack it.

Here are my keys. They get me into the church. Some of you have the same keys. Are they my keys? No - but I've been given authority to hold them and use them. As a result I can use these keys to open and close the building in furtherance of God's work. It's a question of delegated authority.

The Jews were fully familiar with this idea. Here's a bit of the prophecy of Isaiah concerning the replacement of an evil priest called Shebna with a good one called Eliakim.

Is 22: 21 I will put your official robe and belt on him and give him all the authority you have had. He will be like a father to the people of Jerusalem and Judah. I will give him complete authority under the king, the descendant of David. He will have the keys of office; what he opens, no one will shut, and what he shuts, no one will open.

Jesus, our great High Priest also has the authority of keys: *Rev 3:7 "This is the message from the one who is holy and true. He has the key that belonged to David, and when he opens a door, no one can close it, and when he closes it, no one can open it.* In saying that He has possession of the keys of David, He was affirming that He possesses full authority over the covenant people of God.

This takes us back to the previous verse as well. If we look at Rev 1:17-18 it says this *"Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death".* The conqueror of death and hell means that He has control over them, which is why they will not prevail against the church of God.

So the disciples and therefore the church has the authority to bind and loose. But what. Here are a few suggestions from other verses in the Bible with delegated authority:

1. The authority to evangelise: *"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).*
2. The forgiveness or otherwise of sins: As God's people we should be leaders in promoting the forgiving of those who have sinned against us, but also standing up to sin where it confronts the life of the church. We have the authority and the responsibility to bring forgiveness into situations. That we know. But consider this verse. *In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus (1 Corinthians 5:4-5).* This is quite a difficult area. Do we really have power to leave a situation like this? If we look at how God deals with people, we see that perseverance often ends up with a stop point for those who persist in sin. The interesting thing about this concept is that where it occurs, like here and also in Matthew 18, it is always done in the context of the whole church, and always with a clear discernment of the Holy Spirit. Why? Because for the spiritual health and safety of the church we need to consider people who have sinned and are openly unrepentant as potentially dangerous in churches. I have known churches split over situations where sin has been left undealt with because the church was too afraid to confront it.
3. Authority in matters of faith and doctrine. This can be a difficult one because we are not commanded to make doctrine or rules. But we are here to discern God's word and act upon it. *". . . I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15)* and *"Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch*

out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you" (Hebrews 13:17).

These are all challenges for us as God has given us authority to be world changers - to change the lives of others, to change hurt into forgiveness and to change disobedience into holiness. We have the authority to lead and encourage in all of these. They are what we should be doing - and we have the Holy Spirit's power to get these things done. What's in the will of God comes with the power of God to achieve.

So as we prepare for communion this evening let's come in repentance

- for those times when we've relied on our own strength and not clung to the rock -either as individuals or as part of our witness and ministry as a church
- for times when we've hurt - again as individuals and as a church
- for times when we have not used the authority we have in Christ to tell others about Jesus, to speak out forgiveness and for times when we have not chosen to walk or encourage others to walk in holy paths.

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