

Sermon on Matt 16:13-20/Romans 12:1-8
August 2020

Last week John talked in his sermon about the need to believe in our hearts and profess with our mouths that Jesus is our Lord and Saviour. And here in Matthew we find the very first example of this happening. Peter proclaims that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God! And Jesus tells Peter that he only knows this because God has revealed it to him. In fact, at this stage in his journey Peter did not even fully realise what this even meant. The Jews were expecting God to send them a Saviour who would turn their lives around, but they still had no idea that this Saviour wouldn't be the Son of God in name or by adoption as we are, but would actually be God Himself. Although the miracles that they had seen must have made them wonder just exactly who He was. It is the same for each one of us. If we are ready to believe in our hearts and proclaim with our mouths that Jesus is Lord and Saviour, Son of God, God Himself who is with us, Emmanuel, then this has been revealed to us by God. It is a gift of revelation that is available to everyone, but not everyone wants it or will accept it. Faith is a gift from God. And we are all in very different places in our understanding of exactly who Jesus is and what it means to be in a relationship with the living God. But I do hope that wherever you are on that journey and in that understanding, that you are ready to believe in your heart and proclaim with your mouth that Jesus is Lord.

Jesus then says to Peter that he is the rock on which He, Jesus will build His Church and this is a lovely play on words since Peter is Jesus's nickname for Simon Bar-Jonah, Petros in the Greek. But Jesus is actually talking to all of the disciples, He turns to them and tells them that whatever they bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever they loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Now this binding and loosing has been interpreted in different ways at different times. But it is safe to say that the prominent Jewish teaching of the time used the terms that Jesus uses here, binding and loosing, for the rules that the rabbis

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imposed on the people. The things they said the people could and couldn't do. Jesus is clearly giving the disciples a new authority that comes directly from Jesus and which they will understand more fully when they receive the promised Holy Spirit. God was about to fulfil His promise that He would write His laws in the hearts of those who follow Him.

And so we come to our reading from Romans 12. We are urged by Paul to live our lives as a living sacrifice to God, not living like everyone else but knowing God's perfect will and living by it. Does that seem somewhat daunting? It really isn't as difficult as it sounds. It is really just about accepting who you are, not comparing yourself to others, especially not thinking that you are better than anyone else. And it is about offering the gifts that God has given you, back to Him in the service of God and His people. Because, Paul explains here as he explains in other places, we need each other. We all have different gifts, different things to offer. There is not one gift that is more important than another and we need all of them. We need to work together.

If I am honest with you this used to terrify me. You see I honestly believed for a very long time that I had absolutely no gifts and nothing at all to offer God, the church or anyone else. In my Church at the time there was a course called Body Building which was all about finding out what your gifts were and how you could use them. So, against my better judgement I was encouraged to do the course, part of which involved getting people who knew me to fill in a comprehensive survey of what they thought I was good at and not so good at. I hated every minute of it. But what came out of it very strongly was that I had a gift of hospitality. As it happens, and I didn't know this then, but hospitality is a wonderful and very important spiritual gift. It is much more than providing food and drink, although that can be important; it is also about how you make people feel welcome and accepted and comfortable. It was a gift that we see Jesus

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practicing over and over again in the Gospels. In fact the very first miracle, turning water into wine is a practical miracle of hospitality. John said last week that it seems that Jesus was a good person to hang out with. He made people feel welcome and accepted, even when he was challenging them!

The gifts that Paul lists here is not exhaustive, prophesy, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving generously, leading and showing mercy. In other places many more are listed, including the gift of administration would you believe! Personally I thank God regularly for those with gifts of encouragement and administration. They are such a blessing to me and to the Church. But so are all the other gifts, we really do need them all. Tucked away in this list is the gift of serving, often very similar to hospitality. Elsewhere Paul calls it, different kinds of service and it can cover all sorts of practical as well as spiritual things. The root word in Greek is diakonia and the same word is used in Acts both for the ministry of the word (preaching) by the apostles and for serving on tables at meals. From this diakonia we get our word Deacon and I think I have told you before that every C of E minister is first ordained as a Deacon, one who is called to serve and it remains our primary calling no matter what else we may go on to do. Even the Archbishop of Canterbury is still a Deacon, a person called to serve God and others. And actually that is what we are all called to do. And so all that any of us are asked to do is to humbly make ourselves available to God and to others, and to use whatever gifts we have in order to build up the Church and help others. You might feel, like I used to, that you have nothing to offer. But I guarantee you, I promise, that every single one of you has gifts to offer and is needed by the rest of us.

When I was told that I had a gift of hospitality, I was really chuffed. I loved to help with coffee and especially with the monthly shared lunches at church and I got quite good at organising them. But I was happiest making the coffee and

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washing up. I really enjoyed being in the kitchen. Sadly, over time my back got much worse and it got much more difficult for me to be as much use. I could no longer bend over the sink or lift the tables and chairs. But by then there were lots more people to help and I was helping out with the young people, but that is another story.

This first part of our Romans reading sounds quite complicated and maybe a bit scary.offer your bodies to be a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is, His good pleasing and perfect will. Let’s hear it in the Message version:

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

So, following on from last week. Are you ready to believe in your heart, proclaim Jesus is Lord with your mouth and place your life and your gifts before Him as an offering to serve Him and to serve and to bless others?