

Pentecost 12
27/8/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 51:1-6

Psalm 138

Matthew 16:13-20

God's cross-shaped key

"...I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16.18f)

Is this not enough to send a shiver down the spine of any modern leftist Christian type (of which there a couple present here today), and enough also to raise the ire of any Royal Commissioner investigating church processes? What are we to do with binding and loosing authority of the church given its long history of catastrophic failures, whatever good the church might also have done?

As a way into this, a couple of exegetical notes: The function of holding the "keys of the kingdom" appears a couple of times in Matthew. The first is here, when Peter is "given" the keys. The second appearance is in an attack on the scribes and Pharisees:

^{23.13} 'But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. ¹⁵Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

The word "key" is hidden in the verb "lock". Jesus gives to Peter what is implicitly held by the present religious authorities. To the extent that Peter does the opposite of what Jesus criticises here, he would handle the keys appropriately.

Linked to holding the keys is the authority to "bind" and to "loose". This also occurs again later in the gospel, where the shift is from Peter personally to the church more generally (that is, from a singular "you" to a plural "you"; cf. Matthew 18.18). "Binding and loosing" was a technical term for determining when laws apply and when not. Jesus has already done some important binding and loosing in Matthew's gospel to this point. In the Sermon on the Mount we hear repeatedly, "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you" (with respect to adultery or murder or oath-making, etc.; 5.21ff). This is a "binding", an extension of a regulation. On the other hand, Jesus' actions and teachings in relation to the Sabbath amount to a "loosing" of the Sabbath (12.1-14). It is this kind of interpretative authority Jesus gives to Peter.

Of itself, authority to interpret is unremarkable. Any community will find that it has to invest *someone* with such authority. If there is an offence in the text here, it is the linking of this authority with *heaven*: whatever you bind or loose on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven. Can *God* be bound or loosed in this way? It is as if Jesus allows that the *church's* will be done, in heaven as on earth. How is this anything other than simply terrifying?

Yet Scripture is not naïve here. The problem of the church mishandling its authority has escaped neither the attention nor the *contention* of the Scripture. In fact, the authority given to the church, personified in Peter, is *immediately* over-stepped by the church, in Peter, and receives immediate condemnation from Jesus. To make the connections between the authorisation and its misuse clearer, let's play a little with what comes next in the story:

²¹ From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be bound [killed], and on the third day be loosed [raised]. ²² And the church [Peter] took him aside and sought to bind him [began to rebuke him], saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." ²³ But he turned and said to the church [Peter], "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you do not understand your confession [are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things]."

What do we see here? See that in Peter's (in *our*) identification of who Jesus is – one of the climaxes of the gospel narrative – both the great authority of the church *and its failure* to exercise that authority appropriately are immediately manifest. *From the outset* the text demonstrates what we might imagine we now see clearly only with the benefit of hindsight: the church will bind and loosen in the wrong way. The authority and its abuse are *part* of the gospel story and not a contradiction of it. The Scriptures are not naïve.

And now to push a little deeper: if the *first* thing the church does with its authority is to bind Christ then it is in fact the *only* thing the church does with its authority. To put it differently: if Jesus is the presence of the kingdom of heaven – an earthly binding and loosing which makes heaven present – then Peter's attempt to restrain him is the authorised church manifesting the original, foundational sin. The fall from Peter's free confession of Jesus as Messiah to his rebuke of Jesus is *the* Fall we know from Genesis. "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build..."; "You are Adam and Eve, and all of this is yours, except..." Here Peter (and we with him) takes as his own the divine prerogative to know what is good and what is evil, and judges God (cf. Genesis 3).

This arrogance is untenable but it *is* central to relationship between God and God's people. And the point of recounting the failure even of those who rise to the heights of Peter is to illustrate that the problem is *intractable*. Earth will bind heaven. What, then, is heaven to do?

What heaven does not do is convene a Royal Commission into church failures, or in any other way bring an "outside" authority to bear to effect justice. There *is* no outside authority; "the church" here is all humankind manifest in the unfortunate Peter, in our "parents" Adam and Eve, and so in us. What heaven "does" is the cross: the cross as the place at which the irresistible force of our willingness to bind God meets the immovable object of God's loosing love.

But the cross is a difficult sea to navigate. This is partly because we consider that the human abuse of its freedom is a moral problem, and so one which we can sort out. Properly, *scripturally*, the human condition is a mystery within which contradictory things are held in tension. And so the cross is both darkness *and* light, death *and* life. The offence of the cross – its darkness – is what forces Peter's hand to attempt to bind Jesus here. Yet it is this attempt to bind God which makes the cross what Jesus then calls *us* to as the source of revealing and liberating light.

If the Scripture is right about us and about God and about our relationship, we will not sort out the “problem” of moral failure arising from, or being met with, the blessing of God. This we cannot untangle this knot; the cross marks an impenetrable truth which is nevertheless a necessary truth.

What we can say is that the call to take up the (“our”) cross is not a call to do what Jesus did. The cross marks the collision of our high calling with our capacity to overstep. Jesus will be judged and condemned – *marked* – by the cross. If Jesus is in any way indicative of the divine, then the divine itself is also marked by the cross. It comes to be that, when we look at God, we can only see as if through a cross-shaped keyhole.

For us to “take up” the cross is for us to see that this is how God lets it stand. Through the cross we see God, and God sees us. We must take up our cross in following Jesus not in order to do what he has done, but in order that we might see him at all, and be seen by him. Perhaps here we can borrow Paul’s “through a glass darkly” (1 Corinthians 13): the mystery of the cross is the darkness through which we are beginning to perceive just what love might be, how far it might go, how distant we still are from being such lovers ourselves and, yet, how deeply we are loved nevertheless.

Of course, there is no “keyhole”, there is no “glass”; all of this is a playfulness by which we might be opened to what cannot be directly said or experienced with simple moral logic. We can’t say it directly because, while *sin* is quite logical and rational, *grace* is not. Grace looks like play in contrast to hard moral work.

We open ourselves to the logic of grace in a similarly playful way in the drama of our weekly liturgy. A body broken and blood poured out are the signs of human authority over-stepped, even by those who ought to have gotten it right. And so the ghastly act of eating and drinking the tokens of body and blood is *supposed* to be ghastly. There is a shock here. It is the shock of Peter’s fall from Great Confessor to Grand Inquisitor, which *is* the shock of an apple plucked greedily from a branch, which is – to proffer but one non-scriptural example – *is* the shock of cover-ups of the sexual abuse of children in the church, which *is* the shock of a God crucified by his own people, *the heart of every moral shock*. Eating and drinking here is a reception of our own brokenness.

Yet, at the same time, we receive the elements as a sign of a reconciliation, and of an overcoming. If God only sees us through the cross, God nevertheless *sees* us, although not as we do, “in a glass, darkly”. If the gate between heaven and earth has a cross-shaped keyhole, then God’s eye is pressed up against it. You see much, much more through a crevice when you are right up close. We look though the cross from a distance and so see but a little of God and a lot of the cross, but God is pressed right up against it and so sees all which *can* be seen through it. The closer *we* get to that keyhole, the more we realise that what is to be seen through it is the eye of God, beholding us, pressed up so close that he can no longer *see* the offensive cross but sees only *through* it.

What does all of this mean?

It means that if the church has an authority to bind and loose on earth and in heaven, it is a cross-shaped authority. In the cross we know that everything we will ever do has already been comprehended, understood, judged, for when we look to God for confirmation of our authoritative actions and statements we see only the cross. But we know also that everything we will ever do is also redeemed, for the more the cross fills our field of vision, the more we discover ourselves to be caught in the loving gaze of God.

The cross binds us and looses us. It is only when we are confined and liberated in this way that we have any binding and loosing authority from God.

In all of this – and it's been a longer haul today than usual – I've not said enough to *persuade* anyone. Persuasion through argument is another form of moralism, and that is not the province of the gospel.

There is here, in the end, just an invitation: to take up the cross, to turn it over in heart and in mind, to consider whether it might be the key to who you are, to who God wills to be for you, and so be the means by which the God's kingdom is unlocked.
