**Matthew 16:23-30**

**The Church is born**

Last weekend, as you know, a few of us were in Berlin with our sister church there, celebrating the 500th anniversary of the German Reformation, under Martin Luther. It was such a significant time to be in Germany, and I felt really privileged to share that.

It was a weekend when the Church itself was celebrated and I’m not that we do that often enough at St. Andrew’s, to be honest: to actually stop and celebrate what we have here…It’s always easier to think about what we don’t do well. It’s always easier to think about what still needs to be developed and to think about what is missing from our church life. But to actually stop and celebrate what we have, and encourage one another in that is a really important thing to do, because the Church, so the Bible tells us, is the Bride of Christ. Jesus loves the Church as a Groom loves his Bride and I think that we should spend time loving our Church, celebrating our Church, so that we don’t take for granted all that God has given us at St. Andrew’s.

And today, in our series of sermons about ‘What Christians Believe’, we are taking a moment to think about the Church. So far, we have thought about the nature of God and the nature of our relationship with him. But today, we are reminded that we are called into a community life together: that we don’t just exist as Christians in isolation, as individuals, but that we are called into a community life together; to support one another, to encourage one another, and crucially…to worship God together.

Christianity is a community faith, not an individualistic faith: if we are not engaged with the community, immersed in the community, there is something missing in our life of discipleship.

And what is this community about, that we call Church?

It is a community that first and foremost proclaims Jesus as the Son of the Living God. That is our purpose, that is our reason for existence: to worship God and proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, and everything else is secondary to that.

It is good that we have social events at St. Andrew’s – but that is not our primary purpose. It is good that we forge friendships here – but that is not our primary purpose. Our primary purpose is to worship God and proclaim Christ as his Son. And participating in the life of the Church inevitably involves personal cost and sacrifice because it involves a challenge to our priorities.

I don’t often tell stories from my own life in sermons, but I will tonight at the All Soul’s Service and I will this morning in this sermon. Because it is important for us to realize that engagement with Church involves sacrifice, for all of us, including me.

Before I was a Vicar, I worked for Waitrose as a Warehouse Manager and then Fruit and Veg Manager. It was in the 1980s, and some of you may remember that Terry Waite was taken hostage in the Lebanon by Islamic Jihad and that he was held for 5 years. And during that period, no-one knew if he was dead or alive.

I believed that he was alive, and that if he was alive, then he wouldn’t be in a position to receive Holy Communion. So I made the decision to take Wednesday as my day off work each week and always work weekends instead so that I could go to midweek Communion each Wednesday and receive Communion on behalf of Terry Waite and ask God to somehow transfer the Communion I was receiving into a weekly act of grace in the life Terry Waite. I did this for the whole 5 years of his captivity.

About 3 years in, I was offered a promotion in Waitrose with a substantial pay rise but the problem was that I would now have to work Wednesdays instead of Saturdays. So I had a choice to make: do I take the promotion and the extra money, which I desperately needed, or did I remain faithful to my commitment to church and faith and do what I could to continue serving Terry Waite in captivity?

I prayed about it for a few days and then I went in to see my Manager and politely refused the promotion, explaining to him my reasons why.

Now there was a real cost to me and my wife in making that decision. But it a moment of decision where I had to assess my priorities - and I knew that the worship of God was my priority, regardless of the cost to me.

For all of us, there is a call on our lives to put the worship of God first, even when there is a personal cost to us. And the worship of God is the absolute priority of the community of the Church. And that’s what we see in this passage from Matthew’s Gospel this morning.

Jesus and his disciples are walking through Caesarea Philippi, which is a sort of ‘retirement town’ for Roman officials. And Caesarea Philippi is in a valley surrounded by hills and as the disciples looked up into the hills, they would have seen hundreds of statues of foreign gods, hundreds of idols that were used in worship: Roman gods and Greek gods. And surrounded by all these idols and foreign gods, Jesus asks them this question: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

That is a question that is asked by God of us today: “Who do you say that Jesus is?”

Like the disciples, we are living in a multicultural, pluralistic society, where many different gods are worshipped. We are living in a society in which people create idols out of many things. What is an idol? It is a thing or an idea that displaces God from the central position, something that replaces God at the centre of our lives - and we all have idols in one way or another: the idol of social media, the idol of a social life, the idol of sport, the idol of career, the idol of ambition and so on.

And God comes to us and, as we hold the tension of all aspects of our lives that could potentially become idols for us, he asks us, “Who do you say that Jesus is?”

Now, we could say one of many answers, because there are many answers given in the world today: Jesus was a good man, Jesus was a moral example, Jesus is someone I think about when I get a free moment in the day, Jesus is part of a nice story that I dip into at Christmas and Easter for the kids, Jesus is part of the St. Andrew’s story, which I dip into when I have time.

But Peter, in this passage, makes an incredible statement: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God”.

Wow!

What an incredible claim! “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God”.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that is who Jesus is?

In the depth of your mind and the depth of your heart, do you really believe that about Jesus? He is the Messiah. He is the Son of the Living God.

If we truly believe that, then surely that challenges every priority in our lives. If we truly believe that, then surely Jesus has to come first in every aspect of our lives.

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God”.

And it is that firm belief about who Jesus is that is the basis of the Church: not our social life, or our Festivals, or our finances, or our buildings. The reality of who Jesus is, and the need to worship God as a result of that, is the foundation, the first priority of our Church at St. Andrew’s.

And that is exactly what Jesus says to Peter here, in verses 17 and 18: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!...on this rock I will build my church…”

The Church is built on the solid rock, the solid foundation of the confession of Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. So that confession of faith, and the worship that springs from it, must be our absolute priority over all other things.

And if we make that our priority, then the Church will remain strong and will be able to withstand anything. As Jesus says in verse 18, “Even the gates of Hades will not prevail against it”.

We don’t talk much about spiritual warfare at St. Andrew’s, but we must never forget the reality of the spiritual battle that goes on in the world; that there are forces of darkness – demonic spirits – that want nothing more than to see the Church of God fail. And if churches are tempted to prioritise anything other than the worship of God as the central focus of their existence, then those churches are vulnerable to spiritual attack. But Jesus makes the promise here that if we build our church on the confession of Christ and the worship of God, then the gates of Hades will not prevail against us.

So, we have here the incredible claim that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. We have here a challenge to us to re-orientate our priorities in life in response to that truth – making sure that the worship of God always comes first and we have this incredible claim that, if we build our church on the right priorities, then no forces of darkness, no demonic spirit, shall prevail over us.

But Jesus still has one more incredible claim to make here that will challenge how we think about ourselves as a church community and what it means for us to be a part of that community. Verse 19: “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.”

Now, this is an extraordinary statement, that stresses for us the deep responsibility we have at St. Andrew’s to share the Gospel with others.

Jesus says, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven…”

Keys are a really important sign of authority, aren’t they?

As a staff team, we often laugh at David Andrew’s, because we can always hear him coming before we see him because all those church and Parish Centre keys are clunking away as he walks. David’s big bunch of keys is a real symbol of his authority in this place!

When you are a teenager – and your parents finally give you a key for the house: that is deeply symbolic moment – a rite of passage – into adulthood.

When you start a new job, and you are given a key for the office.

And at its most painful, when you retire after a lifetime of work and the final act of your working life is to hand back the keys: a deeply symbolic act…

I remember being Vicar of one church, and the Wardens were very keen to remind me who was boss in that Parish: and it wasn’t me…it was them. And I was Vicar there for 3 years – and they never gave me a key to the church building! A very symbolic act of power on their part…

Keys are about power and authority - and the sharing of keys is about sharing power and authority. In Berlin last week, I was chatting with Anya, their Pastor and do you know how many keyholders they have for their Parish Centre? 200!! 200 people have keys! And that is a deliberate act on her part because she believs that by giving every hall user a key, she is empowering them to become a full member of the community.

Keys are powerful symbols.

So when Jesus says to us, “I am giving you the keys of the kingdom of heaven…”, this is an immense and radical statement about the power and authority that Jesus is giving us a church with regard to the work, and the ownership, of the kingdom of God.

Now, when you are a key holder, you can use that key for two different reasons: you can unlock a door to let people in, or you can lock the door to keep people out. And the same is true for us as key holders for the kingdom of heaven in how we conduct ourselves as a church. We can either create the kind of church that has ‘an open, unlocked door’ that welcomes people into the kingdom of heaven, or we can create the kind of church that locks the door to outsiders and keeps them out, whilst we enjoy the church for ourselves.

Jesus has made us the key holders and so we have a responsibility to ask ourselves, “What sort of church do we want?” A church with unlocked doors, or a church with locked doors?

And how we choose to conduct ourselves as a church will, of course, have eternal consequences for so many people. Either people will be able to find God at St. Andrew’s, or they won’t. And if they find God at St. Andrew’s, that will positively impact their eternal salvation but if we prevent that, then it will have a negative eternal consequence. As Jesus says here, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

What an incredible responsibility is given to us: a responsibility almost too much to bear…

But nevertheless, Jesus trusts us with the key to the kingdom: he thinks that you and I are trustworthy enough to be key holders.

Some of you, like me, will have had children old enough to have passed their driving test. Can you remember back to that first moment, when you handed them the keys to your beloved family car for them to drive away for the first time on their own? How nervous a moment was that? Not just hoping that our child would be safe on their own on the roads, but also hoping that they wouldn’t wreck the family car in a moment of stupidity and loss of concentration!! You all remember that moment, and the things we said: “Drive carefully. Don’t go too fast. Look out for danger. Keep you eyes on the road. Come back in one piece. Bring the car back in one piece!”

Did you ever think that Jesus may be saying the same thing to you and me with regards to the Kingdom of God? He has given us the keys: we can open the door and let people in or lock the door and keep people out. We can be responsible with the keys to the kingdom or we can behave irresponsibly. Jesus gives us the keys to the Kingdom and he says to us: “Drive carefully. Don’t go too fast. Look out for danger. Keep your eyes on the road. Come back to me in one piece. Bring the kingdom of heaven back in one piece!” And so we slightly nervously put the keys into the ignition of the kingdom, reverse out of God’s driveway, and head up the road. The sense of freedom is exhilarating – but the sense of nervousness keeps us focused.

But God trusts you. God trusts me. He has given us the keys.

The question for us is this: “What sort of church will we create?” Will we use the keys to unlock the kingdom of heaven for others or will we use the keys to keep them locked out?

The choice as to what sort of church St. Andrew’s will become really does come down to you and me.

You have been entrusted with the keys. Use them wisely.