

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 23 August 2020

Lord Christ, we believe in you. Help our unbelief. Amen

Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

The power of binding and loosing by the transformers in Christ

When we hear the words binding or loosing, what images come to our mind? The first thing may be a cord or ribbon to bind something. Using that cord or ribbon, we bind things, and they become immobile until we loose them. Loosing something is to set it free. One of the powerful examples of binding and loosing is in John 11 - 'raising Lazarus. Lazarus is the brother of Mary and Martha. He becomes very ill. The sisters send a message for Jesus to come and save him. When Jesus comes to Bethany, Lazarus has been dead four days. Jesus asks Martha to show him the tomb. Reluctantly, Martha - the sister of Lazarus, takes Jesus to the tomb. Standing before it, Jesus calls out, 'Lazarus, come out.' The dead man comes out, his hands and feet are bound with strips of cloth, and his face is wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."¹ This passage includes all the elements of binding and loosing. Lazarus is bound with the burial cloth - a symbol of death. When Jesus looses him, the burial cloth has to be unbound so that he can walk again. Jesus doesn't use any other means, but the words, 'Lazarus, come out.' Apparently, the word of God is related to binding and loosing things on earth. We'll find it out more when we see how the church came into being and how she has received the keys to bind or loose things on earth. We'll also see what things the church is supposed to bind or to loose. In light of binding and loosing, the life of the church will be discussed in the present context.

Believers in Christ Jesus undergo transformation first. In Romans 12:1, the key to understanding the passage is to 'be transformed,' not to 'transform yourselves.' That is, transformation comes about as the gift of God, not by the works or efforts of human beings. One of the results of the transformation is that we come to believe in the gospel. Sometimes we hear people's comments on scripture- the Old Testament and the New Testament, which look like mythologies or folk tales. It may happen because there are so many things in scripture that we are not able to explain by reasoning only. What scripture says that unless God opens their eyes and ears, they will not understand. In other words, they haven't been transformed in Christ in the first place. Being transformed in Christ enables us to understand the gospel as the word of God.

Another aspect of transformation is that it enables us to discern the will of God. God's will is primarily to save the world through the only son of God - Christ Jesus as God loves the world so much. Being transformed in Christ means that we are bound by the love of Christ. At the same time, we are loosed from death. In doing so, we are also empowered by the risen Jesus as we are entrusted with the keys to bind and loose things on earth.

Matthew shows how the church² - the community of transformers in Christ is entrusted with the keys to bind and loose in 16:13-2. Before Peter confesses Jesus the Messiah, the son of the living God, all the disciples have already confessed Jesus to be the son of God (14:33). Here Peter seems to be the recipient of revelation and the rock on which the church is built. What makes Peter and the church so special is nothing inherent to either, not their brilliance or their faithfulness, not their cunning or their courage. Peter immediately will show himself fail to understand the mission of Jesus when Jesus foretells his death and

¹ John 11:44

² The only appearance of the word 'church' in any of gospels is in Matt. 16:18 and 18:17.

resurrection. Jesus calls him ‘Satan.’³ The church proves no more insightful than Peter, either. Yet both remain special. The church as a whole is entrusted with the keys.

The keys to bind and loose things on earth are given to the church in a context of conflict. In Matthew, the designated opponent is ‘the gates of Hades’. The word translated ‘prevail’ (*katiskuo* - κατασχύω) suggests that death takes the offensive, laying siege to a beleaguered community. Yet the church hangs on to the faith of Christ. In doing so, the church is able to bind things with the love of God and to loose those from an iron grip of death. Here death is an umbrella term that includes everything that is not able to hold the love of God. Also, the image of ‘gates’ means an immobile, defensive posture. In this context, the church is the aggressor, the invading army who are loosing/liberating Hades’ captives. What needs to be noted here is that the church’s sole weapon is the word of God that is delivered through prayers and the works of love.

The church is entrusted with the keys to God’s reign, whose mission is to continue binding up the world with the love of God. Binding and loosing are the essence of the life of the church. In our celebration time, we heard lovely things that have happened in our lives. Whether you are aware of it or not, sharing one another’s life is an act of binding by which we are nourished and comforted. Worship life is another powerful means of binding up people/things by which we are renewed continually. Prayer is another powerful binding work as it is our communication with God in quiet time. When we pray, we don’t do it alone but with the Holy Spirit as we became one body in and through the Holy Spirit. Reading and contemplating scripture are other ways of binding us up with the truth of the gospel. In the world, there are so many things we want to bind with the love of God and loose them from the grip of death. We don't need any grand blueprint or funding or hundreds of church members. What we need is faith in Christ Jesus and a few words of simple prayers. When we do in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving and let our requests be made known to God, then, ‘the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.’⁴ As such, whatever the church binds, death cannot loose, and whatever the church looses, death cannot bind. Death is destined to lose because its opponent has been given the decisive weapon – the word of God. May God help us understand it and make us bind the world with the love of God continually. Amen.

³ Matthew 16:21-23

⁴ Philippians 4:6-7