

Matthew 16:13-20

Our gospel passage this morning is familiar enough to us, with Jesus posing the question to His disciples about His true identity, and Peter, so often the spokesperson, giving the 'correct' answer. And the point is often made that Peter's response is more than just an observation, but also a confession: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". And that, of course, invites us to make the same confession – not just a statement of belief that we can roll out each Sunday, but a personal acknowledgement of the lordship of Christ in our own lives.

But, important as that is, I want to dwell not so much on that as on what follows. For it is once that declaration of Jesus as the Messiah has been made that Peter is told that he will be the rock on which the church will be founded. And then come those curious phrases, "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".

The keys of the kingdom of heaven probably refers back to a passage in Isaiah (22:15-25), and implies that Peter is being given the responsibility of a servant who will look after the master's household in tune with the master's wishes, but also with a responsibility and freedom of personal discernment. And that discernment extends to binding and unbinding (loosing) things on earth. But what exactly does that mean?

Well, first, it's important to note that this same phrase is used again a little later in Matthew's gospel (18:18), where it is applied to the whole church. So, this isn't just about Peter, and a particular responsibility that was just his, but about the church as a whole. And so, it has continuing application right up to and including the church today – something we'll need to come back to.

To try to draw out what this might mean, I want to look at two events in the Acts of the Apostles which, I think, will help. They are very different and represent, in a sense, the two ends of the spectrum of binding and unbinding.

The first is the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 (1-11). You'll probably recall that in the early church, members sold their possessions and gave the proceeds to the church. Ananias and Sapphira did likewise, but agreed between themselves to keep back a proportion of the proceeds. That, in itself, seems not to have been at issue. The issue was that they each claimed to Peter that what they had given to the church was the full proceeds of the sale. And Peter calls out the lie: "You did not lie to us, but to God" (5:4), he says. And first Ananias and then Sapphira fall down dead as a result.

I think this is an example of Peter 'binding' something on earth – lying, not just to others including the church, but particularly to God, and the severity of it – and no wonder that "great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things" (5:11). We might well feel that same fear if the severity of that 'punishment' were to continue today – beware the Treasurer!

But, let's leave that for a moment and look at the second event. This is from Acts 10 and again involves Peter but this time with the centurion Cornelius who was a "devout man who feared God" (10:2), but who was a Gentile, a non-Jew. And you'll probably recall that, as part of this story, Peter had a vision of a large sheet coming down with all kinds of creatures in it, and was told to get up, kill and eat. And he refused on the basis that he had never eaten anything "profane or unclean" (10:14). But he is then told, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (10:15).

And then the men sent by Cornelius arrive, Peter goes with them, and, to cut a long story short, Cornelius and all who heard Peter speak receive the Holy Spirit and are baptised. Peter had come to realise that "God shows no partiality", and that "if then God gave them the same gift [of the Holy Spirit] that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (11:17). Here is Peter unbinding something on earth, loosing what would otherwise have remained a huge restriction – Jews, yes; Gentiles, no.

But when Peter gets back to Jerusalem, he is criticised for going to uncircumcised men and eating with them (11:3). And he has to defend himself to the church, which he does successfully. But the issue of circumcision won't go away, and there is subsequently 'The Council at Jerusalem' – the first recorded equivalent of our General Synod, or the equivalent in other denominations. And this takes up pretty much the whole of chapter 15 of Acts, the outcome of which is a letter to the Gentiles which concludes, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell." (15:28-29).

Now, do you see what has happened here? The Church (capital C) decided to welcome the Gentiles and to free them from the burden of circumcision. The Church, following Peter's lead, had 'loosed' something on earth. But, at the same time, it had still bound certain things – basically idolatry and sexual immorality. These still remained as restrictions – "essentials", as the letter put it.

All of this originated in Peter's realisation that he must not call unclean what God had made clean – in other words, Gentiles. Peter realised that he must 'loose' what he had originally thought must be 'bound'. And an argument can be made that the early chapters of Acts, through to chapter 15, show the gradual unfolding of Peter and the early church as they realise, through the work of the Holy Spirit (Acts is really the acts of the Holy Spirit), that what they originally thought must be bound (Ananias's and Sapphira's lying, for example) must be loosed (the admission of the Gentiles to the church without circumcision, for example).¹ But also, that not everything should be loosed – there are still some things that should remain bound.

¹ See, for example, James Alison, 'You can if you want. Navigating Christian faith, conscience, and matters LGBTQ+', Bloomsbury, 2025, who makes this argument in the context of gay issues. Consider also the various healings and exorcisms that take place (Acts 3, 8, 9), which also demonstrate a 'loosing' of previously 'bound' things.

So, how does all this relate to us, and to the Church now? Well, in a similar way to the unfolding that took place in Acts, we can point to the Church's 'unbinding' in relation to things such as slavery, gender equality and racial equality, even if not all of these things apply to all denominations, and even if, where we have 'loosed' them, we still have further to go. There is also, for example, a lot of work going on now about neuro-divergent people, and how the Church can and should celebrate and engage them in its life and practice – 'loose' them to be fully part of the Church.

The big issue which remains partially unresolved in the Church of England as elsewhere is, of course, the gay issue and whether, and to what extent, gay people should be 'loosed' from any restrictions that might apply to them. And this illustrates the complexity of some of these issues, and how the Church seems both to loosen and to bind at the same time.

The House of Bishops has said, "God's invitation to know, love and follow him through Jesus Christ and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit extends to all people, in every place and time, without exception, and thus including all those who are LGBTQI+". And, in relation to same-sex relationships, it continues: "The House of Bishops has commended the Prayers of Love and Faith for use in existing services in local churches as a way of offering public affirmation and recognition of the goods which are to be found in same sex relationships."

But, in relation to extending this to same-sex marriage, the House of Bishops says, "Some bishops, clergy and lay people believe it would be right to enable further provision, such as permitting Church of England churches to solemnise the marriages of same sex couples. However, we have not found sufficient consensus to proceed further with these suggestions at the present time, given the range and balance of views across the Church. Our common discernment on these questions will continue in the coming years."²

So, here is both loosing and binding.

But then there are, of course, things that are and should remain bound: abuse, whether domestic, physical, psychological, sexual, or religious; and sexual immorality being the two most obvious.

To a large extent, we are 'followers' in respect of all of this. That is, as the local Church here, we are rightly governed by what, in our case, the Church of England decides in these matters. But that does not free us from the responsibility both of abiding by those things that are bound and those things that are loosed by the Church, but also of seeking the will of God through the Holy Spirit as to what more and what else may be required of us in our local context.

And just to remind ourselves, we said in our Parish Profile that we have a "commitment to being a welcoming and inclusive community, where people who are marginalised or excluded in wider society, including LGBTIQ+ people and immigrants, can know that

² https://cofeportsmouth.contentfiles.net/media/documents/document/2026/01/LLF_bishops-statement-jan-2026-final.pdf

they fully belong". And the PCC has unanimously endorsed the offer of Prayers of Love and Faith for same-sex couples. Here is our 'loosing' in so far as we are able.

But, in relation to loosing and binding in general, our prayer needs to be that we may continue to be a Church here where we can say with some confidence, "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" in our practice.

Amen