

Ordination of Priest sermon at Blackburn: 29th June 2019

Matthew 16.13-19

There was a man who started a new job. It was a promotion he didn't expect, so he was nervous when he went into the office on his first day. He found on his desk three envelopes, with a note from his predecessor: "Open if things get tough". Two months in the shine had gone off the new job and he was wondering if he'd been promoted beyond his ability, so he opened the first envelope: "Blame your predecessor". Right – that worked for about a year, but then things steadily got worse and worse, so he reached for the second envelope: "Do a re-organisation". OK, great idea. But then two years on, things went downhill again... so one day he opens the third envelope: "Prepare three envelopes".

Over the years, I've been on lots of interview panels. I've put together lots of job descriptions and it's always tempting to add to the list of essential criteria:

Must be the Angel Gabriel.... Or must be Wonder Woman

I don't know which panel put together this *job* description we're [about] to read but I'm sure you'll notice - it's completely OVERWHELMING:

Of course, the language of job descriptions sets us up in the wrong paradigm. Being a priest is a vocation a calling. But let me pick one line for example:

"Priests are To search for his children in the wilderness of the world's temptations and guide them through its confusions that they may be saved through Christ forever"

So for your sakes, I'm pretty relieved that only come to all this through the lens of our incredible Gospel reading which we've just had read today, St Peter's Day

Breath-taking words of Jesus:

"I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock *I* will build my church and the gates of Hell will not overcome it".

It's not up to Wonder Woman or the Angel Gabriel – it's up to *Jesus* – the responsibility is on *His* shoulders. Which is a massive relief – because *HE IS the SON of the LIVING GOD*

As you are ordained into this new season of ministry, of calling.... may I remind you – it's His responsibility not yours.

You see we can take ourselves, ever so seriously.

In a beautiful coincidence, I was ordained as a bishop exactly one year ago today – a big do in York Minister. On the way to York we got stuck behind a van. The slogan on the van read: "Take your job seriously, but never yourself". Was the Lord speaking directly to me?! Formal occasions like ordinations, can become ever so serious: retreats & robes; processions & promises; oaths of obedience.... - in many ways – rightly so, we trust you're not undertaking this calling lightly. ... But don't take yourselves too seriously, because it's not down to you. It's a massive job to build the church. But it's not on your shoulders – Jesus says – its up to him. And He is the Son of the Living God. And the gates of hell will not prevail against it – because Jesus has already been to hell - and - kicked - down - its - gates.

Now if you were to tune into our media, say 15-20 years ago when I was ordained, you might have thought that all the indications were that the gates of hell would prevail against the church... It seemed to be quite common to lampoon the church, especially the C of E (we didn't always help ourselves!). So when I was ordained priest, TV role model – Vicar of Dibley... but better than the male role model – Rev Timms from Post man pat – grey, insipid & perfectly harmless. I don't see any Rev Timms here today.

Scroll forward to today, and there's intrigue about faith and the church. Look at the recent programming on the BBC: Rev – about a vicar in inner city London; Broken, award winning drama about a Catholic priest in Liverpool; and my favourite - Bluestone 42 about an attractive young female chaplain serving with the army in Helmand province of Afghanistan.

Church in our country has been waking up as we've entered the 21st century. We now provide half the toddler groups, most of the youth provision and foodbanks in our country. If you were describe the church in secular terms, you'd impress yourself by describing a charitable organisation with volunteers of all ages, with branches in every part of the country, rich & poor, rural & urban, village & city. But the Church isn't really about the organisation, what it does (Archbishop Justin Welby joked that we're not "the rotary group with a spire") The best translation of the word Church from the original Greek language is: *Community*. It's about the people, in love with the risen Jesus, filled with His Holy Spirit, the breath of Jesus, compelled out into our parishes, schools, chaplaincies by the love that is breaking the heart of God.

Jesus is quite clear: God the Father's heart is breaking for his children who have gone missing. He's longing for them to come home. No questions asked.

What's such encouraging news is that people like you, from all sort of backgrounds, all sorts of characters, are stepping up to be leaders, to be priests in the Church today. To be part of his search team.

"Priests are To search for his children in the wilderness of the world's temptations and guide them through its confusions that they may be saved through Christ forever"

It's been a privilege to have met many of you in various guises this year and spent some time at Whalley Abbey with you on the ordination retreat. The Diocese of Blackburn is very blessed that you've stepped up and said yes.

But you've not said Yes to building His Church – that job is already taken.

So what are you saying Yes to today?

Let's take a closer look at our reading:

v. 19: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven"

Take note of what Jesus is telling you today.

If you ever forget that look at the Blackburn Diocese logo – coat of arms: Two crossed keys

Today you stand in the succession of Peter, an unschooled ordinary fisherman, who Jesus gave the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

What on earth does this mean then?

I wonder if you've ever come across *Escape Rooms*. We discovered them a few years ago. Sounds a strange concept. Clever concept because you pay good money to be locked in a room with your group of 4-5 friends or work colleagues. You then have to follow a series of clues to break codes to find keys to get your way out. And the clock is ticking. You only have an hour. Not for the faint-hearted. Now you might be thinking of plenty of work colleagues you'd rather not be locked in a room with. I've avoided suggesting to the Bishop's leadership team here in Blackburn as I believe Bishop Philip has already had a go at this with his nieces & nephews and they were particularly bad at it.

However, I would like to inform you – since I have a competitive streak – that the Duff family are undefeated champions. We have done 4 rooms and we have 100% breakout rate. Last time with only 3 seconds to go....

Today Jesus gives you keys to lock and unlock. To bind & loose. Use them.

What are you binding and loosing? Do we have any clues?

We need to read this in the context of Peter's rollercoaster apprenticeship with Jesus. The words of binding and loosing are always used in the context of binding evil and loosing healing or wholeness.

So what might Jesus be giving you authority to bind?

I suggest there's plenty of fear, despair, abandonment in our country fresh from the pit of hell... You can add to the list, just by picking up a newspaper or reading the news on line. Apparently a Tabloid editor told his newsroom - "I want you to print fear!" Fear sells papers.... But I would suggest that in our country at the moment we're feeding ourselves to death on fear. And it's not necessary!!

We can't help being afraid, we can't help being in despair.... We're only human.

Martin Luther said this: You can't stop the birds flying round your head but you can stop them nesting in your hair.

Notice when fear starts nesting in your hair, in your church, in your family, in your workplace, in your community.

Then you need to get out the keys that Jesus has given you.

On the flipside, he gives us keys to unlock.... To unlock the atmosphere of heaven, the kingdom of heaven. He gives us access all areas. The gates of hell will not prevail.

His love, His joy, His hope, His peace.... You might think this is just the stuff of Disney films, the happy ever after... and Disney make so much money from it because what they are fantasizing about ... is actually true.

If you read to the end of the Bible, one day heaven will come to earth. One day no more fear, despair, abandonment: (Rev 21): "One day the dwelling place of God will be with his people and He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away".

"Priests are To search for his children in the wilderness of the world's temptations and guide them through its confusions that they may be saved through Christ forever".

Have you noticed how much advertising goes into selling the concept of "home"

Go to Ikea & you can buy "a happier life at home"; Go online to Rightmove and they will help you find your "forever home". This sales pitch works, because I believe deep in our hearts, we long for our home in heaven. Augustine (a 5th century bishop) who spent his youth searching for God in all the clever philosophies, the wild living of his day said this:

"God you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you".

As part of Vision 2026, Bishop Julian is encouraging us to pray for a visitation of the Holy Spirit on the people of Lancashire.

I believe the Spirit of God is whispering in love to Lancashire, to our country today: We miss you please come home.

So - finally - as you step forward to be ordained today on St Peter's Day as priests in the Church of God

Take the Keys that Jesus is giving you to the kingdom of heaven. And for goodness sake – use them! He will show you how. And on that day in the future when we meet Jesus face to face and see earth and heaven as it really is, may you bring with you many lost children who the Father has been longing to call back home. Because the gates of hell will not prevail.

Amen