

Cotham Proper 18 10 September 2017 a

“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”. In the name of the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Last Sunday we were saying goodbye to Richard- we were letting him go- and he was letting us go. It was a wonderful and wistful celebration of all his years ministering among us. And a few days ago, someone said “I was suddenly shocked by the theme- I don’t like letting go and I don’t want to let go”. This led into an interesting discussion. But, as Richard said- we will all have to learn to let go of different things at different stages of our life.

And it struck me that to be able to let go – we need to recognise what we hold dear but what can even bind us and stop us moving on.

One of the most poignant moments in Bach’s St Matthew passion is the duet between soprano and alto when they quietly despair at the sight of Jesus bound and powerless. “Behold my saviour now is taken. Moon and stars have for grief the night forsaken”. And then in a quiet despairing repetition they repeat “They lead him hence”. In the background, the chorus mutter angrily “Loose him, leave him, bind him not”. Eventually they erupt into a furious outburst invoking thunder, lightning and even the gates of hell to swallow up the people who betrayed Jesus.

It’s a poignant moment because you are forced to confront the image of Jesus who is utterly powerless and passive- led away to inevitable torture and death- all the worse because we know the end of the story. It’s a picture that was terribly enacted a few years ago when IS published execution videos on line. Such powerlessness is hard to witness and hard to bear. Although in our daily

lives are not in imminent danger of being led to our death, nevertheless we can feel bound, and powerless

So, Richard asked us to think about letting go. And the week before we heard Derek Jay remind us to trust in the future and let go of images of nostalgia and wanting things to remain the same. In the gospel reading today Jesus says

Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.

Tellingly it follows a short passage which seems to be a handy guide to getting on with members of your congregation and how you deal with conflict and difference. It tells us how we might be bound in ways of doing things and how when these are challenged conflict arises.

It made me imagine how we might go about it here at Cotham how we challenge each other here at Cotham. On small level, it might run like this “Well Ginny I do notice that you are not using fair trade washing up liquid”. “But Mary could I be so bold as to point out that the dates you served are not fairly traded either”. That sounds like I’m trivialising things. I’m not!

In our mission statement, we affirm that we are a community that love and cherish everyone. That doesn’t happen in a vacuum. It is not a wishy-washy statement and we can only do that if we are free enough to respect difference- and if we are not bound to an image of ourselves or the other person. It can only happen if we truly respect each other’s boundaries and allow them space.

Brother Roger of Taizé used to tell his monks that community was total – it cost nothing less than everything. I heard a story that one of the Brothers told of how once he had tested Brother Roger as a joke, taking a piece of cheese from his plate while he ate. “You have taken my cheese,” said Brother Roger.

“Ah yes, Brother Roger, but today you said that community was total.” “Yes,” said Brother Roger, “but community also respects the edge of my plate.”

His words are important. Community respects the space and humanity of the other. Religious communities look like places of peace and harmony- in reality they are certainly not but everyone there is committed to working for the greater good of serving God- while acknowledging there may be profound personality differences. It’s about giving both oneself and someone else the space and the room to find one’s connection with God. That needs trust. Whoever we live and share with, be it in the family or the workplace, there will be conflicts of interest and tensions between us.

So how are we bound? What are we bound to?

And does it have to be like that?

- We are bound within ourselves- past sadness and griefs that have never been allowed to be shared or even experienced because they are overwhelming or shameful. And we can happily exist until something occurs in our life- a loss a bereavement, loss of a job, loss of an image of ourselves. Suddenly we must face our self and our fears and our emptiness. It can be devastating and cause profound reevaluation which in my experience as a GP can be very painful but given space, attention and love can result in a renewed energy and wholeness.
- But we are bound externally- family partners, work communities, church communities. Bound by party political allegiances, bound by restrictive economic policies. Being bound to each other can be positive- it can mean that we are connected and not alone- that we can support and be supported. But we can be bound by pettiness, irritation, and lack of vision.

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In Ezekiel today we hear his constant theme- return to God who will save you. “Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live? Turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?”. I don’t think he means literal death- I think he means bound to the past, to the patterns of behaviour and living that turn us away from God. Being bound to the deadly myth that change might just cost too much.

But we don’t have to live like that. We don’t have to live without hope as a tightly closed up nation. That seems such an important truth to hold onto in our world, our political life. There really is no need to accept tawdry half-truths in our political life.

I had to live through the Thatcher years with constant repetition- “There is no alternative” and it seems to be repeated now in the mantra that austerity is the only way through our political crises. That arming ourselves to the hilt will protect us, that building walls will make us safe. They won’t.

In contrast throughout scripture we are offered an alternative. The alternative of love and mutuality, of sharing and breaking down barriers. The lesson to Romans has what for me is one of the most thrilling verses in the New Testament. “Now is our salvation nearer than when we first believed”. It is so hard to trust and believe BUT a new day dawned with the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus- and ever since we have been living in the overlap of old and new. St John sees the vision of the new heaven and the new earth.

There really is an alternative.

Amen

