

Matthew 16:13-28

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[0 : 00] Amen. I think Paul asked me in passing in the early summer if I would come down and I didn't think he was serious so I think I foolishly said of course.

And then I should have realised one of two things. Either that he'd already asked the people who are really his best friends and he was kind of getting near desperation point.

Or he had this extraordinary Celtic prophetic gift and that he knew the nation would be in political crisis. And being a Welshman ministering in England with an Irish wife had kind of limited the field of guest preachers for an occasion like this and he thought he would look after the barber.

And I do, it really is a tremendous honour. It's got a minor evangelical knighthood to be asked to be part of this service today.

And I realised earlier on this morning that Paul is actually preaching through Matthew's Gospel. Thankfully for me he hasn't reached chapter 16 yet and my purpose is not to expound the whole of this passage.

[1 : 58] He will do that I'm sure later on in the year. But to draw your attention to the famous words of Jesus in verse 18. You are Peter.

Peter has confessed that Jesus is the Christ. On this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not be able to prevail against it.

Many of us I think have been praying that this weekend and the opening of this building, which is obviously a decisive point in the history of this church, will also be in God's providence a turning point in the ministry and fruitfulness of the church's life.

And it's really for that reason that I've chosen this text. Because it is both a decisive point and a turning point in the Gospel. It's a decisive point because this is the moment where Peter's eyes are opened by the Lord and he confesses that Jesus is the Christ.

If Peter ever afterwards were asked to date the turning point in his life, when he fully came into a confession of Jesus Christ, having followed him but now confessing him, undoubtedly this would be the decisive point.

[3 : 27] But it's also, as you'd have picked up in the reading, the turning point in the Gospel. And so Matthew tells us it was from this time onwards that Jesus began to emphasize very clearly to the Apostles, and he does this on a number of successive occasions, that because he is the Christ, because he's going to fulfill the ancient prophecies as the Messiah, as the suffering servant, as the Savior.

It means he's going to Jerusalem, he is going to suffer and be crucified, and on the third day he is going to rise again. And so this is very much a hinge point in Peter's experience, and it's a hinge point in the Gospel story.

It's a decisive point, and it's a turning point. And I want us to try and think about the meaning of what Jesus says to him, but also the significance of that for us in our Christian lives, but also perhaps especially in the story of this church.

And I want you to notice four things with me. The first is, in some ways, the most fundamental. It is that Christ's building of the church is the absolute focus of his ministry.

The statement he makes has a kind of, well, it's almost got the ring of a manifesto. This is his program. And it, in the synoptic Gospels, in Matthew here, it has the ring of one of those double amen sayings of Jesus.

[5 : 16] Everything he says is true, but there are some things that are, as it were, centrally true, that make sense of all the other things that are true.

And you can sense that in the way he addresses Peter here. You are Peter, on this rock. Here is my own building program. I am going to build my church.

Now, most of you know that one of the strange things about this is that the word church is mentioned on only three occasions in the Gospel. Mentioned here in Matthew 16. It's mentioned twice in Matthew 18. And it's often been a conundrum to people. How can we say that the church is the epicenter of Christ's ministry program when he scarcely mentions the church? The answer, I think, actually is that it's pretty clear in this passage that although Simon Peter and the others confessed him, they didn't understand him. And until they understood who Jesus really was and what his ministry was, there was no way under the sun they would ever understand what the church really is.

[6 : 38] And that's still true, isn't it? People who don't know who Christ really is think of the church characteristically in organizational, superficial ways.

And so there's a very clear reason why it is that Jesus infrequently mentions, uses the term church. But it's very evident from his parables, from the fact that he had chosen these apostles, from the fact that he was preparing them for a future ministry, that all the word occurs infrequently. The idea is the big idea in Jesus' mind. That is to say, Jesus did not come only to redeem individuals.

Jesus came to create a new community altogether. He came not to save one and then another, but his vision was to bring a glorious restoration of what had been fragmented and fractured and virtually destroyed in the fall.

And so Jesus comes and he is going to build his church. He is going to create this new community. And it's clear that the apostles understood this.

[8 : 05] Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, again and again speaks about how Christ is the, he's the head of everything, but he's the head of everything for the building of the church.

And he's given gifts in order that the church might be built and churches work properly and build themselves up when each part is functioning in the power of the Spirit and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And it's evident that they understood very clearly after Jesus' resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that what Jesus always had in view in his coming and teaching and dying, shedding his blood, rising, ascending, now sending his Spirit, was to create this new, ages long, worldwide, multi-ethnic, new community that here in Matthew 16, 18 he had described as the church.

And so right from the day of Pentecost, the way in which the apostles think about what is happening is this, that the Lord adds daily to the church those who are being saved.

This is a Christ-created, spirit-endowed, divinely planned, new community.

[9 : 38] And that reminds us in a way as we read through the New Testament that at the end of the day it is Jesus' church that is his greatest evangelistic instrument in the world.

And it is that. And this is a very striking thing in the New Testament, isn't it? Very few instructions about how to do evangelism. Why are there so few instructions about how to do evangelism? Because they understood that this new community that Christ was creating that caused Peter, you remember, Peter says this in his first letter, people will ask you questions about the hope that's in you.

Why would people ask them questions about the hope that's in them when people asked so few questions about the organizational church about the hope that's in them?

Because they had been brought into this glorious new community. And in many ways, in that day and in our day, they lived in a pre-Christian era, we lived manifestly in a post-Christian era.

[10 : 53] This was what struck people. The early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles were told on the one hand, people looked at the church and they thought, I'd run rather than think I would join them.

And then you remember, in the very next breath, Luke is telling us that people were actually crowding into the church. Why was that? Because they saw the reality of the presence of Christ in the midst of his people.

And this is surely our prayer for here, that strangers coming in, as they might have come into the church in Corinth and sensing, yes, an atmosphere, would find themselves at least inwardly bowing down and saying, surely God is in the midst of these people.

And this is our experience, isn't it? People come to the funeral of a believer and they find themselves, for all our sadness and loss, they find themselves in a world they have never seen, of people with joy in the midst of sorrow, with hope in the midst of death.

And they wonder why it's so different. Or they come in from their dysfunctional families, which are in extraordinary proportions in our day.

[12 : 23] And they see the family of the Lord Jesus functioning, and although they have no words to articulate what they see and experience, they realize, love it or hate it, join it or seek to destroy it, in whatever sophisticated ways that this is how God meant life to be.

And there is a taste of it in his church. And this is our Lord Jesus vision. And when you think of it, it's an extraordinary vision, not just because it's an amazing thing that this was the goal of his ministry, but because he makes it very clear here and elsewhere that he intended to build his church with people, who were marked by tremendous frailty.

And that's really, you know, you all know there are great debates about this text, but this is really the point of this text, isn't it? This is really the point of saying, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.

This is a crumbling rock. And it becomes evident almost in the next sentences, when Jesus begins to explain how he's going to do it, Peter takes hold of him and refuses to take it in.

It puts his body between the cross and Jesus. And even after Pentecost, he still struggles. The point here is that the Lord Jesus is going to use stones that have cracks in them.

[14 : 06] to work them together in order to build his church. And it's a message that runs through the whole of the New Testament, isn't it?

From here right to the end of it, that the Lord delights to use broken, fragile people whom he is beginning to mend.

People with angles and awkwardnesses that he's chiseling away in order to bring them together so that they may encourage one another. And it's an amazing thing when you think about it, isn't it?

Whatever Jesus means when he says, you're Peter and on this rock I'm going to build my church, there is some sense in which Peter was the key man, wasn't he? Every time the apostles are listed in the New Testament, Peter's the first one to be mentioned.

Every time the three are listed, Peter's the first one to be mentioned. What's Jesus talking about here? He'll build his church, he'll give him the keys. Well, he's talking first of all about that moment on the day of Pentecost when one might say the spirit whispered to Simon Peter, you're the one with the keys in your pocket, get up and preach.

[15 : 26] And Peter got up and the doors of the kingdom of heaven were swung open. The sins of thousands, they experienced forgiveness.

They were baptized and physically, as it were, tangibly experienced this symbol of the washing away of their guilt and their sins.

And in the very territory where they could point to the place where endless thousands of sacrifices had been made, that they knew could not really take away their sins.

And Peter flung open the gates of the kingdom of God to them and later on in Acts to the Gentiles. it is an amazing thing that he takes this proud man with so little emotional intelligence, so little real self-knowledge, and in a sense he walks Peter through his being crushed.

Oh, Peter, Satan has desired to have you, to sift you like wheat, and the only reason you'll survive is because I have prayed for you that your faith will not fail, and this is, I remember when I was a teenager reading this kind of, I guess it was meant as a slightly funny comment, but it had its own penetration of the angels in heaven watching this, and then turning to the father and saying, so what's plan B?

[17 : 06] that this should be plan A, and you can see why this happens, it is so that none of the glory will go to Simon Peter, but that all of the glory will go to the Lord Jesus, it's what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4, isn't it, that he puts the treasure in earthen vessels, so that all the glory will be the Lord's, the joy will be ours, the thankfulness will be ours, but the glory will exclusively be his, the older Christians used to think that Paul was referring to Gideon and the 300 there, that you could defeat the Midianites, remember the Christmas prophecy, it will be as in the day of the Midianites, that it's these frail vessels broken open and the light shining that brings the victory and the triumph so marvellously, this is a, this is an amazing statement

Jesus makes and it's an encouraging statement for, for us, just look at you, look at you, the rich and beautiful people of Ealing in the leafy suburbs of London, no we're not, we're, we're nobodies, most of us in the room are absolutely nobodies, people pass us in the street, don't give us a second look, but Jesus is building his church, through us, and the gates of hell, says Jesus, will not be able to

prevail against it, that's the third thing I want you to notice, Jesus' church building lies at the heart of his ministry, it's his goal, he's doing it through people who are marked by great frailty, and the third and important thing is, he's doing this on enemy occupied territory, I mean, what's happened here in a sense, I'm not saying the sisters were the enemy, but what's happened here, land has been reclaimed, a new building has been built, and this is what Jesus is doing, he is reclaiming territory from his enemy, the gates of Hades, he says, will not be able to withstand, actually, that's the same verb that's used in the passion narrative about the people shouting for Jesus' crucifixion, and their voices triumphing, and Jesus is saying, no matter how many voices call for the destruction of the Christian church, what are the people around here were saying, you know, these poor people in that strange little Presbyterian church, and they've had to move out, and they're meeting in all kinds of places, that there is no chance that they will ever be able to do anything here, that you see, Jesus is building his church, and nothing can prevail against Jesus building his church.

For my own part, I think when Jesus speaks about the gates of Hades, he's not just speaking about darkness and death, or even the place of the dead, I think he uses that expression, gates, because it has a certain ring to it, the gates in antiquity, of a city.

Those were the places of authority. You remember when Boaz wanted to marry Ruth, where did he go? Where was Town Hall? He went to the gates.

[21 : 02] You want to look at a virtuous woman, then Proverbs tells you that her husband will be esteemed at the city gate. Does that mean she's banished him from the house?

No, it means he's part of the leadership. Part of the strategy group of the village or the town or the city. And Jesus is giving them and us this insight into the fact that he is going to build his church on territory that the enemy has come to occupy from Genesis 3 onwards.

words. This is why at the end of this gospel, Jesus says, now you need to know this, all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.

Well, didn't he always have all authority in heaven and earth? No, he didn't. No, he didn't. He had to deal with the prince of the power of the air before he won back authority on earth.

That's why he's able to say the son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins because of what he's going to do on the cross. And this is a powerful thing that Jesus is saying.

[22 : 28] We have to go into all the world because he's regained as the second man and the last Adam. He has regained the authority that Adam lost, created to have authority, to have reign, given dominion and losing the kingdom.

And now Jesus has overcome the enemy. And he's got twelve men and one of them will betray him. And he's down to eleven.

And the gates of Hades. You can see that. You can see in the gospel story how Satan's strategy against Jesus changes.

Early on it's to keep him from the cross. Later on it's to get him to the cross, outside of the will of God. So he will use every hellish strategy to destroy this kingdom.

But Jesus prevails. And from then on he prevails everywhere. he will use him. But it's a word of counsel to us, isn't it? That wherever he builds, the gates of Hades will seek to withstand.

[23 : 46] They will seek to shout down. That's an interesting metaphor, isn't it? Because it's happening all around us. Just mention the name of Jesus or say something about the Bible and you're liable to be shouted down.

this is a contemporary ring about it. And I want you to know that this is not just some future prophecy that Jesus is giving.

These very men saw this promise and prophecy come true within 18 months. They saw Jesus building his church and then in the early chapters of Acts, what do you discover?

You discover all hell being let loose. And employing Satan's three characteristic strategies. First of all, intimidation.

Seeking to intimidate the church from outside. And then the seeking of position by individuals inside, Annias and Sapphira.

[24 : 58] And then when both of these strategies fail, then the third strategy is one of producing internal division, isn't it? In Acts chapter 6. Get them murmuring against each other.

These are these three characteristic strategies. He's always using them. He uses them against every Christian, every church, every fellowship of God's people.

But here is the promise to which we anchor ourselves. Jesus is building his church. And the gates of Hades will not be able to prevail against it.

But my dear friends, we need to have, we need to have the wisdom that we get from the Lord Jesus to keep our eyes open for those strategies as he builds his church here.

And that leads to the fourth thing. Jesus building the churches at the center of his ministry.

[26 : 02] Jesus builds this church with people like ourselves, marked by great fragility. Jesus is ongoingly building his church in enemy-occupied territory.

And Jesus is always building his church on the pattern of his own destiny. Church architects are really interesting people.

And some of them are really strange people. For example, it's a very unusual church architect who knows how to build a pulpit. You go to the lecterns, the lectern architects design, and they're designed for architects, not for preachers.

But I want you to notice this. When Jesus is the architect, he builds the church on the pattern of his own destiny. I wonder if that's why ye oldie, worldie architects, when they built churches, they characteristically built churches with the ground plan of the cross.

And the rest of this narrative, as you will find out in however many weeks' time, is a narrative that tells you that when Jesus builds his church, he molds his people into the shape of his own destiny.

[27 : 26] And so he speaks here about his crucifixion and his resurrection, and he goes on to speak about the fact that the disciples are going to share in that crucifixion by taking up the cross, and they're also going to share in that triumph, because they will see the Son of Man coming in his glory, and they get a little glimpse of that, three of them, on the Mount of Transfiguration later on, but they're all going to see that.

And you see, he's advising them from the beginning, although only later on would they understand it, that since the Father used a cross-shaped model in the life of his Son, he will of course continue to use that model as he builds the church.

And so the whole pattern of our individual Christian lives, as the apostles make clear, and the whole pattern of the life of our church is going to be a sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

I long to fill up, says Paul, what's still lacking in me of my fellowship with Christ and his sufferings.

I want to share in the fellowship of his sufferings so that I can share in the triumph of his resurrection. It's the shape of the Christian life, and it is the shape of the church.

[28 : 53] And a glorious new building, and the more you look around this building, the more interesting it becomes. A glorious new building will not change the pattern that Jesus is using.

There will be suffering. suffering. There will be apparent setbacks. There will be disappointments. There will be a tremendous sense of our own weakness, and not knowing what to do or how to do it.

But if Jesus continues to build his church here, as we pray and believe he will, there will also be those marvelous moments when we sense we are sharing in the fruit of his suffering and in the power of his resurrection.

And we see people coming in who have never been to church in their lives. People who have begun to read the Bible. Strangers and sometimes strange people. And we discover perhaps that Satan creates conflicts within, and we need all to flee to Jesus, the crucified and risen one, and cling to his promise that he will build his church.

Calvin says so beautifully in his commentary on 1 Peter from the very beginning, Christ has shaped the church to share in his death and in his resurrection so that death would be the way to life and the cross the way to victory.

[30 : 32] This is a little share in the resurrection, isn't it? I mean, we wouldn't be here unless Jesus were risen. But we've come to know him in the power of his resurrection and we will share in the fellowship of his sufferings, become like him in his death.

But yes, we will share here and hereafter in the glories of his resurrection. He is our church builder, our risen Lord, our glorious king.

and as long as our eyes are fixed upon him, then all will be well because he and not we, he is the real church builder.

When Paul asked me for a text and a title, I did actually answer his email, incidentally. I said to him, you know, it would be fun to call it build and they will come.

But then I said, that won't do. Call it Christ the church builder. And then I noticed it's called build and they will come. That won't mean anything to you.

[31 : 43] And I'm not a great movie watcher. But there is a, there's a Kevin Costner movie. Some of you will have seen Field of Dreams. It's very American. I know, I've been there.

And it's very, you know, it's almost new age-ish. This man in Iowa or somewhere, he hears this voice saying, build and they will come. And so he builds a baseball field because he's had this voice saying, build and they will come.

And it costs him up the earth. I think he mortgages the farm. People think he's off his rocker. And then towards the end of the movie, all these great baseball stars who incidentally are not grown men wearing pajamas.

You want to see a ball being hurled at you a hundred miles an hour and being able to hit it. And all these great baseball stars from the past come because he's heard the voice build and they will come.

Of course, it's sheer fantasy. fantasy. But this is reality. Because he is the builder.

[32 : 59] So keep your eyes fixed on him for this reason. He's both the architect and the builder. More, he's the son and he owns the house.

thanks be to God for him, for this, for you, for these children who should be in the choir of the year competition.

Either that or this room has fabulous acoustics. Both I suspect are true. May God bless this church to his glory.

Let's pray. Our heavenly father, we thank you for the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We think of the sacrifice that has been made that we might sit in this room.

We know it has all without any diminution been because of his great sacrifice for us. Where would we be? We would not know each other.

[33 : 59] We would not love each other. We would not have walked together through this journey. we would not have the hope of the gospel. We would be separated from God and without hope in this world.

But you have shown such grace to us in your son. We thank you for the thrill of living in his reclaimed world and seeing his kingdom extended.

And we pray earnestly, father, that you would guard this family of yours here. That you would wonderfully use them for your glory.

That their number may increase. That you will add to the church here. And that we will be able to look back on this day as a decisive day because so much of the work is now completed.

But also a day of turning when it seemed as though the windows of heaven were opened and you poured out new blessings upon your people. Hear us, we pray, and receive our thanks in Jesus' name.

[35 : 07] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.