

Locked Down - Not Locked Up!

[Isaiah 51¹⁻⁶; Psalm 138] Romans 12¹⁻⁸; Matthew 16¹³⁻²⁰

I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.. [Matthew 16¹⁸]

What is a key for?

I don't think that is too stupid a question!
As soon as I reminded myself of the keys given to Peter (recorded in the Gospel) my mind went to the current lockdown.

Now, I ask again, what would you use a key for?

So, with today and another Sunday before we get back to public worship at St Mary's, we have to recognise that the Church has been locked down, not locked up: the work of the Church has continued, but how successful have we been in that ongoing work for God and his kingdom?

(Mercifully, we aren't dependent on grades made up by teachers or messed up by OfQual - as God really does know what the grades are on our assessment.)

Permit me to pick three things from the readings today that we could test ourselves against:

✦ **Who do you say that I am?**

The Church is a mission community. Our task is to tell people about Jesus and to call them to commitment. Has that stopped during lockdown? No! Here we are using technology and interfaces that were never in our imagination because we have been forced to - but it continues our mission.

Are there new disciples and people who have found faith? I cannot tell you that. Only they and God know that. Has faith been resurrected, strengthened or renewed? The answer to that (only because people have said) is a resounding yes.

We go on telling the Christian story and the invitation to respond is ever present: to be forgiven, guilt free and purposeful because that is what God in Christ makes possible for us.

✦ **Living sacrifices**

I asked this same question a few weeks ago, as I have many times before and will many times again: How much progress as a Christian have we made as individuals over the past 5 months? Have we used the additional time to read the Bible, to pray, to do something to help someone else?

The phrase that always sticks in my mind when I read about living sacrifices is, *the trouble with living sacrifices is that they keep crawling off the altar*. I can't see you as I would a normal congregation, but I can feel the squirming over the wi-fi and that urge for me to move on to something else.

If you and I aren't better Christians now than we were 5 months ago then we have failed God and let ourselves down. There is a question about whether the things that need sacrificing - our ego; our wilfulness; our eagerness to embrace temptation; our lack of commitment to the basic disciplines of reading our bible and praying; our tenacity in grudges; etc - are things that we are willing to put on the altar at all!

✱ **Compassion with cheerfulness**

What a challenge this seems to be. Many manage **compassion**, but it comes with that voice, that edge of misery where the gloom becomes infectious and the despair contagious. (I comes to something when those who don't come to Church ask for non-religious funerals - as they do - because they want a celebration and something positive).

Certainly, we feel what others feel alongside them, but what we bring is hope:

hope that death is not the end;

hope that God is with us in life;

hope that what is possible is limited only by our faith to ask for it;

hope that God makes a difference to us and to our world;

hope because sin is forgiven and guilt is no more.

The gifts of grace that God gives us in Christ's name and through his Holy Spirit are tools not ornaments - and it is certain that whatever your gift is (Paul gives an example list of **prophecy, ministering, teaching, exhortation, giving, leadership, compassion**) it hasn't been locked up during the lockdown! So the Church lives and grows using the keys given to Peter to bind and loose and to make Christ known.