

**Sunday 23rd August 2026**  
**The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity**

**SECOND READING:** Romans 12.1-8

A reading from the letter of Paul to the Romans

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

**GOSPEL: Matthew 16.13-20**

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.

**Alleluia...**

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And 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. 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.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

This is the gospel of the Lord. **Alleluia.**

*How can the church bind faster? We now are man and wife, and 'tis the church that must but echo this.*

Those lines are from a Renaissance tragedy called *The Duchess of Malfi*, by John Webster. It's a play I have a particular fondness for – it has everything you could wish for in a lurid revenge play. A beautiful young Duchess, a sinister Cardinal, a mad Duke who believes himself to be a werewolf, a ruined church with a ghost in it, a murderer who quotes Classical philosophy. The lot. I highly recommend it if you enjoy that sort of thing. Many of you may know it already. *The Duchess of Malfi* came to mind when I was thinking about this week's gospel reading. The line I quoted comes from a scene where the Duchess has secretly married her steward, the honest and worthy but not aristocratic Antonio. She has done so in secret because she is frightened of her brothers, the Cardinal and Duke I mentioned. The secret wedding carried out, with her waiting-woman as witness, the Duchess speaks those words – “How can the church bind faster? We are now man and wife, and tis the church that must but echo this.”

They came to mind because of the word she uses – “bind”. Saying that the church cannot “bind faster” than this means that the church cannot tie them together any more securely than they are at the moment. To my ear, that's a deliberately provocative word for an English playwright to use during the Renaissance. Because it famously appears in today's reading.

And 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. 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

These verses were enormously controversial during the Reformation. The Catholic Church claimed that this passage legitimated the importance of the pope. The pope, as Bishop of Rome, claimed to be the successor of Peter, and in this gospel reading Jesus said Peter would be the rock on which the Church was built, then promised him the keys of the kingdom of heaven and gave him the right to “bind” and “loose”. This, according to the argument of Catholics at the time, meant that the Catholic Church, and particularly the pope, were the true Church and possessed the right to forgive sins. To “bind” and “loose” is the right to pronounce which sins are forgiven and which are not.

The Protestants, including most English people, and certainly John Webster, the author of *The Duchess of Malfi*, would argue that the right to forgive sins was not given to an individual person as successor of Peter, but to the Church as a whole. I think Webster is deliberately having a dig at the Catholic Church

of his time by that line “How can the church bind faster?” To his character the Duchess, the Church does not have the power to perform the sacraments it claims, it cannot determine what marriages are legitimate or what sins are forgiven, because it is mired in sin itself. In the play, she has a point. Ferdinand is, as we have seen, soon to claim to be a werewolf, and lives in a castle built from the ruins of an abbey, whilst his brother the Cardinal has a mistress whom he kills by making her kiss a poisoned Bible. In *The Duchess of Malfi* the ability of the Catholic Church to bind and loose is extremely compromised.

I do not wish to get into a discussion of Reformation theology here, nor whose claims to bind and loose have more ecclesiological traction. But I do want to point out that we find this language of binding and loosing elsewhere in the Gospels, and elsewhere in the literature of Christian England. One anonymous medieval carol, which I have heard our choir sing to great effect, begins with the lines “Adam lay ybounden, bounden in a bond”. Bound, bound, bound The implicit sequel is that Jesus came to loose. We might notice that when Simon is asked whom the people say Jesus is, he reports that some say he is John the Baptist come back from the dead. The opening chapter of John’s Gospel mentions that John the Baptist, our own saint, was himself asked whether he was the Christ, the Messiah. John denied that he was the Messiah and added:

John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not;<sup>7</sup> he it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose.

In the light of Jesus’ conversation with Simon Peter, this looks like a very wry joke by the Baptist. I had always assumed he meant “I am no much less than him, that I am not even worthy to be the servant who washes his feet when he comes into a house.” But now I wonder if it meant, “You think I am the Messiah? The Messiah will loose the world of its sins, I can’t even loose his sandals.” The ability to “loose” things seems to be oddly on the mind of people discussing the power of the Messiah. We might note in passing that Jesus discusses his power over evil spirits with a metaphor of one who can “bind” a strong man.

That might lead us to notice Jesus’ assertion that he will build a church upon Peter, the rock, and that “the gates of Hades will not prevail against it”. Once again, I think this line has more meaning than I had noticed in the past. I had thought of “the gates of Hades” as an expression meaning roughly “whatever power hell contains”. I suspect I had some vague image of the gates of

Mordor, with the Nine Riders being sent galloping out. But revisiting it, I think it means not “hell cannot send anything out strong enough” but rather “hell’s gates cannot keep in anything which you decide to free”. One can see the idea of the Harrowing of Hell developing from this image, the doctrine that when Jesus descended to the dead, he entered hell and rescued souls for salvation.

In Peter’s escape a gate opened in front of him; in Paul’s a earthquake shook the foundations and opened the prison doors.

The vital importance of loosing. So central to the mission of the Church.