

‘Binding and loosing’ has come up several times recently: on the feast of St. Gregory the Great – successor to St. Peter; on the Sunday before last when Peter is given the keys of the kingdom and, more indirectly, as we’ve been considering the charge to challenge others as part of our Christian heritage or duty – the prophetic role we all have to proclaim the Good News with our lives. This is when the Good News makes uncomfortable reading both for others and for ourselves. The temptation is to hunker down and get through this life as best we can in order to get to our true life in heaven, but the warning to Ezekiel is a warning to us too:

If I say to the wicked man: ‘wicked wretch, you are to die’, and you do not speak to warn the wicked man to renounce his ways, then he shall die for his sins, but I will hold you responsible for his death.

Ezekiel is being prepared for his role as a watchman for Israel, warning Israel that it faces disaster if it does not amend its ways and in its turn fulfil its role as a watchman for others. This is the Church, here not for its own sake only, but to challenge the world in its relation to God and its call to adhere to godly virtues. And it’s why our present Pope is so unpopular – not with the world, necessarily – but with many of his own flock. Perhaps the move from the old confessional box to face to face confrontation can be seen as a symbol of this dynamic – this call to enlarge our vision of what ‘binding and loosing’ might mean. Do you remember the sideways shuffle along the seats as we awaited our turn in the confessional, and the struggle to find something new to say, and the relief to get off with a few ‘Hail Marys’ until the next time. This is confession in its narrow sense: for one’s own sake only, to fulfil an obligation, rather than as a prophetic sign to the world. Indeed, the less people knew about it the better: it had become an embarrassing ritual. Face to face is marginally better and, at least, is indicative of the true role of ‘binding and loosing’ incumbent on us all; a step towards applying this power, which we all have in our daily lives, so that others may, in their turn, be released from their sins. And now we get to the heart of what the Good News means, so ably summed up by St. Paul in this unusually uncomplicated passage from his letter to the Romans:

*Avoid getting into debt except the debt of mutual love...
Love is the one thing that can not hurt your neighbour; that is why it is the answer to every one of the commandments.*

Now there’s a penance worth going home with! For the Good News which calls us to challenge others is the Good News of God’s love for us in Christ, who so looses us from our own sins by his acceptance of us as we are, with all our faults and supposed inadequacies – how can anyone love me as I am? – that we find ourselves, at last, able to love others: not as a penance or a duty or a burden, but as a delight, and to challenge them, if needed, not from a deficit but an excess of love, so that all of us may be together in heaven.

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