

Firm Foundations

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 27th February 2022 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Deut 11:18-21,26-28; Luke 6:46-49

(Not in the Revised Common Lectionary)

Introduction:

Over the last 2 weeks we've been hearing some of the teaching of Jesus in what has been labelled "The Sermon on the Plain" – Luke's equivalent of Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount". We don't know, of course, whether these were 2 sermons, or speeches, given on two separate occasions, or whether this is a literary device in which the gospel writer collects together some of the teaching of Jesus that loosely hangs together by subject matter.

And it really doesn't matter. The important thing is that this is teaching which Jesus gave, and it was such a radical message, delivered in such a memorable way, that his disciples remembered it and passed it on. No doubt Jesus gave the same teaching on a number of different occasions during the 2-3 short years of his public ministry, and said it in different ways at different times. So you may have noticed that in this version of the Parable of the Two Builders, Jesus doesn't actually say that the foolish builder built on sand – only that his house wasn't built on a firm foundation.

The main thing for us, as we read or listen to the passage, or any other teaching of Jesus, is to understand what Jesus is getting at. And the message is simple but stark – if you build your life (which is what the house represents) on weak

foundations, it will at some point come crashing down about your ears, when disaster strikes and you don't have a solid base of belief and practice to enable you to cope.

The challenge of Jesus

In Luke's version, Jesus speaks directly to his followers – which means not just the crowd of his “groupies” and curious onlookers in Galilee 2000 years ago, but all of us who call ourselves Christians.

‘Why do you call me “Lord, Lord”, and don't do what I tell you?’ he asks¹.

It's rather like his challenge a few verses back to those who were rich, happy and well thought of. There Jesus was challenging complacency. Last week he challenged us to love our enemies – yes, not just ignore them or tolerate them, but love and pray for them. Jesus didn't come to tell us that everything was OK, and that God turns a blind eye to all the wrongdoing, hatred and hurt in the world, or to make excuses for us. He came to bring change, transformation, in individuals, in relationships, in society. The Kingdom of God is where people acknowledge God as King and obey him, by turning away from self-centredness and living out the values of love, justice and mercy.

So in today's passage, Jesus is speaking directly to us. “I'm not telling you all this stuff for your entertainment”, he seems to be saying. “I'm telling you this for your own good. If you want your life to be based on firm foundations, don't just listen to me and nod sagely, but put what I say into

¹ Luke 6:46

practice. Build your life on it. There will be storms ahead, and when they come you will realise, looking back, how much better prepared you were because you had embedded my teaching in the way you think, the major decisions you made, the values you espoused, and the way you lived your everyday life.”

One example of what this means is in the Lord’s Prayer, where Jesus tells us to ask God to forgive us our sins *as we forgive those who sin against us*”. God’s mercy is endless towards those who repent, and as Jesus was crucified he prayed for those who nailed him to the cross to be forgiven. We need to have the same attitude.

Forgiving others is one example of taking Jesus’ teaching seriously. I’m sure we all know people whose lives are embittered because of something bad – maybe something really terrible – that somebody did to them in the past. Their bitterness and resentment is like a deep-seated wound that hinders them from moving freely, or like a monster lurking in the basement of their home. Hard as it may be, finding the strength, or just the willingness, to forgive, is the only thing that can really heal, and release its victim.

God knows best

God knows us better than we know ourselves. He is our Creator, and our loving heavenly Father. We would be wise to listen to him and agree that his way is best, and then live accordingly.

This principle is seen in the instructions that Moses gives to the people of Israel as they prepare to enter the Promised Land in the book of Deuteronomy.

¹⁸You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. ¹⁹Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ²⁰Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, ²¹so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the LORD swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.²

The point that is being made both in Deuteronomy and by Jesus is that God does actually know what is best for us. It might seem to us that the teaching of the Bible is old-fashioned, out of touch with the modern world, and something we can cherry-pick to suit ourselves, but that approach is hardly likely to result in our attitude being one of obedience to God.

Listening to the Bible

Now, I need to put a big caveat on what I've just said, because of course the Bible needs interpreting. That would be the subject of a separate lecture, or series of lectures, and I must be brief this morning.

But we need to interpret the Bible with humility and sensitivity. *Humility* means we don't take an arrogant attitude of "I know best because I'm a modern intelligent

² Deut 11:18-21,26-28 NRSV

person". It means we're willing to be teachable, to change our opinions and our behaviour in the light of what we discover. It means that we're genuinely seeking to know what God wants of us, and we're willing to do it.

Sensitivity means we try to understand the original context: what was the understanding that people had at the time, what was the social context, and, most importantly, what was the main point that Jesus (or any of the biblical writers) was trying to get across?

It also means being sensitive to how the teaching will affect people today. Two classic current examples of this are the issue of divorce and the issue of human sexuality – neither of which I can discuss in this sermon!

But the main point I think we can take away from this parable today is that it's no use saying the right things – like "Lord, Lord" – but not actually putting Jesus' teaching into practice in everything we do.

Lent

This Wednesday Lent begins – a time of reflection and self-examination. It's a fantastic opportunity to re-engage with God – to honestly and prayerfully consider how we can be better disciples of Jesus. So we'll be having a series of sermons on different aspects of being a Christian, using the Bible as our resource. I do hope you'll take up the challenge. Because, if you do, you'll be doing what the wise builder in Jesus' parable did – digging deep and laying down firm foundations that will stand you in good stead when the storms of the future break upon you. And I think, from

following the news, that the future will test out what our lives really are built on.

Prayer

I'm going to finish with the well-known prayer attributed to Richard of Chichester in the 13th Century.

Thanks be to thee, my Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits thou hast given me,
for all the pains and insults thou hast borne for me.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know thee more clearly,
love thee more dearly,
and follow thee more nearly, day by day.
Amen.