Sermon for 8th in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Isaiah 55:10-13; 1 Corinthians 15:51-58; Luke 6:39-49.

i

Even as a child I remember being confused by Jesus’ parable about the man who built his house upon the sand. I couldn’t work out why anybody would be stupid enough to do such a thing in the first place.

It was some time before the correct image came to me. Instead of thinking of some chap crazy enough to build his house on the sandy beach a few metres away from the rolling surf and incoming tide, like a 1st century King Canute, I needed to think of a dusty Palestinian street, two houses side by side, looking to all intents and purposes identical edifices to the casual gaze, but underneath being fundamentally different to the extent that one would be highly dangerous to enter and the other safe.

The builder of one house has taken the trouble to dig below the surface topsoil, to break his back in the heat and dust in order to build a safe and secure building, whilst his neighbour has simply slapped his building straight down without foundations. It’s saved him a lot of time and effort, but he’ll rue the day when a storm hits his street.

I can also add a little personal experience too having lived for 5 years on the top floor of a five storey palazzo in Rome reputedly without foundations. Someone told me the story that a few years ago someone came to do some work on the building that involved digging below the floor level on the ground floor. The workman is said to have refused to do the job after quickly discovering the building had no foundations.

I never knew whether the story was true or not, but at the time I believed it to be so – and it made absolutely no difference to me at all.

Despite that story coming from a credible source, I and my family slept soundly. It’s truly amazing how sanguine we become to potential danger. We suppose things around us seem sturdy and reliable enough to our eye and so any suggestion of potential danger appears too small to concern us. I was feeling safe and secure in my house built upon sand.

Amazingly, my attitude never wavered even after being shaken awake one night in bed by the L’Aquila earthquake in April 2009. I simply said, “Oh that’s an earthquake”, and turned over and went back to sleep.

Perhaps Jesus had good grounds for warning idiots about building their houses upon sand.

ii

Our passage today from Isaiah 55 tells us all about the right foundation for building any life – the Word of God. As dependably as rain waters the earth, so dependable is the Word of God.

I don’t take this as a text to argue for the “infallibility of Scripture” or any such notion, but as a text to argue that Jesus, the Word made flesh, is utterly dependable for revealing and accomplishing the purposes of God. Christ is the Word made flesh who has come into the world and Christ has not returned to God “empty” or without achievement, but has done that for which he came into the world – he has brought the light of truth and the healing balm of salvation.

Isaiah’s imagery for God’s Word is redolent with positive natural images of health, harvest and plenty; God’s Word waters the earth, making it bud, flourish, yield seed and ultimately give bread.

Natural images abound in a beautifully poetic passage that speaks of the trees of the fields which will clap their hands, thorn bushes will become pine trees and briers will be transformed into myrtle. The people of God will know joy and peace.

The imagery is similar to that of Isaiah 11 where we read of the wolf lying down with the lamb, the calf and the lion together, the cow shall feed with the bear, and a child shall put its hand in the viper’s nest.

St Paul has hints of such imagery in Romans 8 where we read that creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.

Founding your life on the Word of God is about living life in joy and peace such as to transform a person’s experience of the world. For the Christian the whole of creation sings. Such spirituality stirs the heart of Celtic Christianity.

The Christian life also knows of times of famine and desert. Wesley spoke of his own “wilderness experience” when God seems far off and joy seems to have departed. But such times are infrequent and are usually en route towards the contentment of the Promised Land. God may lead us through the valley because sometimes that is the only way for us to go, but God does not lead us into the desert as an end in itself, but as a necessary path to a greater joy than that which lies behind us.

iii

In our reading from 1 Corinthians 15 today we find a cautionary note to those of us who have built unwisely upon shaky foundations.

St Paul is explaining how he visualises the resurrection hope. He speaks of the Last Trumpet when the perishable shall put on the imperishable and the mortal shall put on immortality. It’s powerful, evocative stuff. It’s poetic too.

But Paul is only writing this because there were some at Corinth who denied there is such a thing as resurrection (1 Cor 15:12). What sort of shaky foundation to Christianity would that be? As Paul goes on to say, “If we have hoped in Christ for this life only, we are to be pitied of all people (v19).”

Yet there have been plenty of people who have built on equally questionable foundations.

I knew a girl once who rejected the idea of the Second Coming because she said there is no point on the earth, being a globe, from which everyone will be able to see the Son of Man descend from heaven.

I also received an email this week publicising someone’s blog in which the author had said he wished to have nothing more to do with regular Christianity with its rituals, doctrines, sacraments, rules and tradition and intended setting up a chain of house groups around the world where he and other kindred spirits could explore together their spiritual hunger.

I may not have recalled exactly the right phrases, but you get the picture.

Forgive me if I sound scornful – I intend no offence – but I wonder why people who have doubts assume the ability to find enlightenment in the company of those who are equally struggling?

It sounds to me more like the blind leading the blind of today’s Gospel passage, or at least the confused leading the confused. Religion cannot be reduced to mere sentiment – it must also have its intellectual, institutional frame.

When Wesley went through his period of doubt and confusion after his unsuccessful trip to Georgia he maintained his fellowship with the Church; he relied even more fully on the holy mysteries of the means of grace – especially Holy Communion and prayer – which usefully allow the soul to speak with God without the full control and stifling effect of the rational mind.

It’s not that Wesley lost his rational faculties, far from it, but he didn’t allow the turmoil of his intellectual condition to dictate his entire life. He entrusted himself to the wisdom of the centuries, to the consoling, affirming Mother Church. He came right again soon and all was well – and despite occasional moments when he felt exhausted and overwhelmed, the means of grace supported him when he was unable to support himself.

Wesley did not go off to find the counsel of others who had also lost their way.

Now we all have moments when we question the very foundations of our lives. Some foundations are more solid than others – for we all know that marriages, careers, our health, even our paternity can sometimes fall around our ears, but God’s Word is as reliable as the rain that waters the earth. We need not doubt the foundation God has laid in Christ.

However, some experiences are so traumatic we do find the solid rock of Christ crumbling under our feet.

In 1 Corinthians 15 we read:

*Where O death is your victory? Where O death is your sting?*

Yet in our commemoration of World War 1 I recall the bitter cynicism of those who had been exposed to the slaughter of Gallipoli and the Western Front sing a parody of those very verses. God knows what these men had endured. And it is hard to imagine God being less compassionate and less understanding than we are.

So if the bottom has fallen out of your world at this time, may I suggest that you let yourself fall into the arms of your Mother Church. Save the questions and debate and the intellectual agonies for later. Rest in her wise and caring arms. You do not have to bear the burden of rewriting the Scriptures and re-casting the Christian story.

Trust in the foundation of God’s Word made flesh and the rest will eventually sort itself. Joy and peace are God’s will for you. Just give it time rather than kick away every support God is offering.

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