

The Parable of the 2 builders

NT Reading:- Luke 6v46-49 (CF Matthew 7 v24-27)

OT Reading:- Isaiah 28v14-18

The Best Sermon ever... ?

The Sermon on the Mount in Mathew and its sister 'The Sermon on the Plain' in Luke are probably the most famous Sermons ever preached, and arguable the most important. In both cases they end the same. What is the punch-line, the finale to these great messages. Surprisingly the climax is a parable. Even more surprisingly, it is one that many just regard as a nice children's story – something to tell the little ones in Sunday School. It's the Wise Man safely building a house upon the Rock, and that silly old man who got it wrong and built his upon the sand.

How has this happened. OK so let's wind back the clock to when I was a small boy. Rewind to 1968. England are the still the World Champions at football. It is Sunday afternoon, and I am where I always am on Sunday afternoon, at Sunday School. In many cases, parents liked sending their children here because it gives them an afternoon off. Not for my Mum, who has just left her twenties behind, for she is helping lead, and is now behind the piano. We are asked what we want to sing next, and we shout out 'Wise Man'. We always want this one. Why, because its got good actions, and it's the only time we are allowed to stand on our chairs, but not before the second verse.

'The Wise Man built his house upon the rock. (Repeat twice).. and the rains came tumbling down. The rains came down and the floods came up. (Repeat) .. and the house on the rock stood firm."

Throughout we would be doing actions, building bricks with outstretched fists, rain with descending fingers, and flood levels rising with ascending palms. Then we get to do it again but this time, if we want to , we can stand on our chairs. This is what all the boys and some of the girls enjoy

The Foolish Man built his house upon the sand. (Repeat twice).. and the rains came tumbling down. The rains came down and the floods came up. (Repeat) .. and the house on the rock fell flat.

As we sung the word flat , we would jump off, and fall over on landing, tumbling across the floor, sometimes taking the chair with us.

And unfortunately for many that is about it, a children's song or a bed-time story from an illustrated bible. So what is this key message from Jesus really about? What do you think? Yes, its something along the lines that the clever thing to do, is to build your life on Jesus, because that's much safer than the alternative. But is that it?

The two versions in Matthew and Luke have differences. Matthews Sermon on the Mount version is the best remembered because it emphasises the difference between a wise man and a foolish man. In Luke's sermon on the Plain account, the emphasis is on the one that has proper foundations and the one that doesn't. As so often with Jesus, we have to go back much further than 1968, in fact to the eighth century BC to Isaiah to properly understand what Jesus is saying.

Isaiah's prophecy of the cornerstone

The dominant super-power of the day was Assyria. The Assyrian army on the advance would sweep away small nations. They would soon bear down on Israel, but Israel had a plan. They did not put their trust in God but formed a

mutual defence coalition with their neighbours Egypt. The country that they had fled in the days of Moses. They were confident that if the Assyrian army approached their door step , a large Egyptian army would rush to help defend them. Egypt had a world-view centred around death and the worship of Gods that governed death. They would cheat death by having this alliance with Egypt, it would be their security, like a secure shelter for them. They thought 'humanly' and decided that they alone with their God could not resist the Assyrians. They underestimated God who later sent an angel into the Assyrian camp and killed 185,000 soldiers in one night [Compare that to the UK army, navy and airforce which total about 180,000 people in all]. So never under-estimate God, and when some-one says that your child or grandchild has been an angel, seek some clarification !!

The imminent bad news: Isaiah spoke to Israel.

A storm is coming. It is heading straight for you, and it will devastate your world.

He knew their plan was futile, and he tells Israel. You boast of your treaty with death and your agreement with the world of the dead (i.e. your deal with Egypt). You are certain that it will provide you refuge, and that this refuge will be unshakeable. But you have built a refuge out of lies... hailstorms will sweep away all the lies you depend on, and floods will destroy this security... you will be overcome.

The future good news: Although the near future was bleak for Israel, Isaiah gave them hope of a more distant future in which God would give the country a cornerstone which would always stay firm and strong. The building tools for that new building, built on that cornerstone, would be justice and righteousness. The foundation stone on which this new unshakeable refuge would be built, would not be an ordinary rock but a precious gem-stone.

Qumran

At the time of Jesus, Qumran had been firmly established for over a 100 years. It was the wilderness retreat of the Essenes, a separatist Jewish sect a portion of whom had formed an ascetic monastic community. There was this centre built into the rocks at Qumran, but most of this community inhabited neighbouring locations, most likely caves, tents, and solid structures, but depended on the Qumran centre for communal facilities such as stores of food and water.

They had their own interpretation on this powerful parable of Isaiah's. In their book on the '**Rule of the Community**'. It says that *in the Council of the Community there will be 12 men and 3 priests, perfectly versed in all that is required of the Law, whose works shall be truth, righteousness, justice, loving kindness and humility... When these are in Israel, it shall be that tried wall, that precious cornerstone, whose foundation will never rock or sway* i.e. will be unshakeable. So the Essenes at Qumran were claiming Isaiah's great 'cornerstone' prophecy for themselves. When their 15 special people were in place, then the great promise of God in Isaiah would be fulfilled amongst them. But the Jews in Jerusalem saw it differently.

The temple in Jerusalem

The room known as the Holy of Holies was the innermost and most sacred area of the temple of Jerusalem. The Holy of Holies was constructed as a perfect cube. It contained only the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of Israel's special relationship with God. The Holy of Holies was accessible only to the Israelite high priest. Once a year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the high priest was permitted to enter the small, windowless enclosure to burn incense and sprinkle the blood of a sacrificial animal on the mercy seat of the Ark. By doing so, the high priest atoned for his own sins and those of the people.

The Temple authorities had named a raised stone at the centre of the 'Holy of Holies' and called it 'the Foundation' stone. Also it can be assumed that the complex of buildings around it with its rituals and sacrifices, built on and

around the foundation, would also be the fulfilment of the Isaiah prophecy. This temple built on the Foundation stone would be unshakeable and never fall.

The Third Way

Jesus is teaching a large number of his disciples. Note in Luke 6 he appointed 12 of his disciples to be Apostles, but he had many disciples. And as he starts the Sermon on the Plain he is primarily addressing his disciples and Luke 6v17 says that there was a large number of them. He teaches them about happiness and sorrow, loving your enemies, not judging others, and that you can tell some-one by their fruits. Then he concludes with the parable of the 2 builders.

Jesus offered up a third explanation to Isaiah's prophecy and parable, by retelling it in a way which said that by hearing and acting on Jesus' Words, you are building on the Cornerstone. He is actually saying, I **am** the foundation stone that Isaiah was talking about.

Jesus was speaking to Israel.

A storm is coming. It is heading straight for you, and it will devastate your world.

All other things will fail. You build your life on me and my words and you will not be shaken.

Like Isaiah, Jesus knew that a great storm was on its way. In the form of the Zealot nationalists, who were gathering strength, and divorced from reality, they would believe that they could fight the Romans and win. This would spark the Roman back-lash, the storm, and its target was the Jews and all they held most dear.

It was an incredible claim. Jesus says to them, forget about Qumran as solid as it is in that rocky hillside, the community will fall. Forget about the temple having the cornerstone, that too will shake and fall. I am telling you that I in person am that Cornerstone. Wow – that is some dramatic claim. It would have been hard for them to imagine that Qumran which had been around for over 100 years (perhaps 200) would ever be overcome.

Even more so the temple, surely such a magnificent place would never fall. God would never allow it.

But the storm came, and devastated all that the Jews held dear.

In AD30, these things would have seemed impossible to Jesus' disciples. However within 40 years, **Qumran had been abandoned (AD 68) due to Roman pressure.** The mighty temple built under King Herod the Great and still not quite finished in the days of Jesus. **The temple was destroyed in AD 70 by Rome.**

Even Rome itself would eventually fall, but the reign of Jesus would be unshakeable. "2 billion followers today, compared to a world population in Jesus' time of just 300 million.

All the great Empires have come and gone, but 7 times as many people now follow Jesus as were alive when he was born. Jesus is the unshakeable cornerstone.

Hard Work

We often make out to people that being Christian is easy. Accept him as your saviour and all will be well. Jesus never said that. In fact he said the opposite.

Jesus used building a house to illustrate his point, but the initial impact is lost on us, because building a house today with all our pre-made parts and heavy machinery, is nothing like building one in the first century middle east. First you had to find the bedrock, which could be 1 inch or 10 feet beneath the top soil. All good builders knew that it where

you always started building, on the rock. Then you would have to cut into the rock to make the foundations and this was difficult even life threatening work that would take an age.

In Jesus' days. No-one built a house in the winter due to the rains, wind and sometimes snow. The long summer was when you built houses, but there was a down-side. The soil had a high clay content, and in the hot sun, the soil baked hard and bronze-like. You could not just sweep it away or use a garden fork. This would have to be broken up and cleared to get to the rock, but being so solid, it must have been tempting to use it as the foundation. The idea of long days of back-breaking work under a hot cloud-less sky does not appeal. The clay seems as hard as rock and surely it will be just as effective a foundation for a one storey building. So you build on the hard clay. But in a storm, the rain will open up a stream, and this will turn into a flood and press in hard on the clay. The ground will turn soft and mushy. The stone walls buckle and soon a wall has broken and the whole house falls down, just like if you had built it on sand.

Jesus is saying that to build on the right foundation, can be hard work, it takes time, it takes discipline and persistence. You can't be lazy or take short-cuts. You will be unshakeable, only if you build on the foundation of Jesus, have him as your cornerstone, and build by both hearing his words and acting on them.

Hearing and Acting

The Isaiah passage sets out a standard for building on the cornerstone... 'Faith that is firm is also patient.'¹⁷ Justice will be the measuring line for the foundation, and honesty will be its plumb line." We build on it patiently, with righteousness and honesty. We must hear his words and act on them.

We must put Jesus into the centre of our lives, like the foundation stone in the Holy of Holies. He must hold the prominent place, and we discipline ourselves to read his Word from our Bibles, daily notes, Christian books and commentaries. We hear his word by talking and sharing about Jesus with other Christians, by having bible-studies, meeting with other Christians at work. We hear his word by going to Christian festivals, and listening to Christian radio and TV. We hear his word by having the bible open in front of us, and praying quietly into it, in the solitude of our own homes.

Then we must act on it, we must hear and understand what Jesus is saying to us, then put in the effort to respond to it by acting on what we read and hear. Loving our enemies, sharing our possessions, not judging others, showing the fruits of the spirit in our life (patience, kindness, self-control etc. We must put in the hard work of building on the cornerstone.

The Storm Comes.

Jesus is speaking again but this time its personal...

A storm is coming. It is heading straight for you, and it will devastate your world.

As an 8 year old in Cheddar singing the Wise Man song I knew all about floods. That very year was the great Cheddar flood of 1968, which ripped up the Gorge and left cars fully under water. After the rain finally stopped my parents took us down the side of the hill to access the best view of the new pier as it swept down the gorge road.

Japan – 6th April 2011, all was calm on the Fukushima Daichii plant, but a storm was coming, and the next day it was coming straight for them. Workers may have seen the wave 40ft high and 100ft deep sweep over the sea wall and bring devastation to the plant.

You may be in a storm right now, but if you not then prepare for it.

When it comes, will you be ready. When we hear and when we act on what we hear, then we will become strong in our faith, and we will need to be built strongly on that firm foundation stone, because the storm is coming. Something will happen in our life that will seek to shake our lives so hard that it could threaten our very faith. This could be a financial disaster, loss of a job, serious illness ,persecution, loss of a loved one.

When it comes, where will we shelter. Augustus Toplady was visiting Burrington Combe,a precipitous crag of limestone a hundred feet high in Somerset England. He got caught in a terrible thunderstorm There is right down its centre a deep recess in which Toplady sheltered from the storm, a large crevice. From this experience he wrote the hymn 'Rock of Ages' cleft for me, let me hid myself in thee. He knew that Jesus was the unshakeable rock in which you could shelter at times of trouble.

If you are in the storm then it is enough just to stand still and stand strong. He is both our shelter and our strength .

We are now the Temple

Paul writing to the Church in Corinth, at a time when the temple was very much intact still, said 'Do you not know that you are Gods temple and Gods spirit dwells in you?' 1 Cor. 3v16. Paul was enlarging on what Jesus had already taught in this parable.

All Human structures will one day fall. Ten tribes of Israel and their cities were lost to the Assyrian Army. Qumran was abandoned. The Jewish temple was destroyed, and a mosque now stands on the same spot.

Yet Jesus is unshakeable. When you accept Jesus into your life and make him the cornerstone, when you hear and do his words. Then the Holy Spirit lives In you, and your own temple can also be unshakeable.

Conclusion

When we live for Jesus, we oppose Satan and everything he stands for. The bible tells us that we will have a fight on our hands. That trials and great testing will come our way. We will find it hard to walk a true path because of all the stumbling blocks in our way and the opposition that rises up against us. We are facing the storm.

However with our lives built on Jesus, by hearing and doing what he asked us to, we will overcome and our lives will echo the words of the great Smith Wigglesworth

Our great fights will produce great faith.

Our great tests will produce great testimonies.

Our stumbling blocks will become stepping stones and

Our opposition will become our opportunities.

And Our trials will be turned into triumphs.

The storm is coming, and it is heading straight for us, but we not fail if our lives are built on that gem-stone Jesus Christ, because in any storm he is unshakeable.

Amen.