

Jesus College – Oxford
Evensong Sermon: Sunday 3rd February
“Firm Foundations”

Matthew 7:21-29

In the year 1174 the Italian architect Bonnano began work on what was to become his most famous project: A bell tower for the local Cathedral. This tower was to be set eight-stories and 185 feet high. There was just one “little” problem: builders quickly discovered that the soil was much softer than they had anticipated, the foundations were too shallow to support the structure. And sure enough, before long the bell tower began to tilt... and it continued to tilt... until finally the architect and the builders realized that nothing could be done to remedy what had by then become known as the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

It took 176 years to complete the tower and during this time, many attempts were made to compensate for the “tilt.” The foundation was shored up; the upper levels were even built at an angle to try to make the top of the tower look straight. Nothing worked.

Today, the tower has stood for over 800 years, but leans about 17 feet away from where it should be. The Leaning Tower of Pisa is a vivid reminder that foundations may well be hidden but that they are nonetheless essential.

The passage read to us, comes right at the end of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s gospel. The question Jesus is asking his listeners, and each of us individually today is this – “what are our foundations like?” He is challenging us to undertake a civil engineering examination on our lives, our foundations, and critically to do so before it is too late. This is, if you like, the climax of his sermon. And he ends with a warning to his listeners.

So let's take a few moments then to have a look at this parable which Jesus tells about these two builders – one wise and the other foolish.

When I hear this story, I naturally want to associate myself with the wise builder - with the one who does things properly, doesn't cut corners, and finishes the job professionally, building well with strong foundations.

We certainly don't want to identify ourselves as the foolish builder who Jesus tells us built his house on the sand. We've all been on a beach and seen the corrosive effect of water on sand or sandcastles. Or perhaps seen the erosion that repeated battering by rain, wind and sea causes our coastline.

Well as with so many of Jesus' teachings in the gospels, there is some real depth to what he is saying and also some surprising, even shocking revelations. Let's take a closer look at these two individuals in the story.

First of all, pretty obviously, they are both builders building houses. Perhaps on the surface, there is little to tell these two houses apart. Both men appear to be capable of building – there are two houses that are completed. But we learn that the difference is that one sinks his foundations deep into the rock, while the other, for whatever reason decides to build his on the sand. To the passing observer, very little distinction between them - but catastrophic consequences for one.

Our company has been building a block of student rooms in Cambridge over the past 12 months. The soil on which we have been building is pretty unstable so the first couple of months' worth of work was setting the foundations deep into the ground. This was a major exercise – it took considerable time, energy and money. But although once a building is complete, nobody goes around admiring foundations, time spent on strong foundations is very well spent – the wise man in this story knew that – however by contrast, the foolish man was more intent to focus on what was visible, apparent for all to see, taking an altogether easier route.

Like so many of Jesus' stories, these have a meaning below the surface. Jesus explains that the wise man is wise, not because of his building prowess – but actually because he is someone who hears Jesus' words and puts them into practice. That is to say, he is someone who listens to Jesus, and then goes on to do what Jesus says.

By contrast however, we learn that the foolish man is someone who, although he listens to the words of Jesus – he chooses not to put these words into action in his life.

The shocking, and perhaps uncomfortable thing that we learn from this story is this – it is that both these two men in the parable heard Jesus' words. They had all the outward appearance of being followers of Jesus. They both had an understanding of Jesus, they had listened to him teaching. And yet, Jesus says that listening to him alone is not enough. The wise man and his house were saved because not only did he hear Jesus' words, but also put them into practice – that is to say, there was a response in obedience.

Back at the start of our passage read to us – Jesus says in verse 21 “Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he (or she) who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” An obedient response.

Not enough then, says Jesus to profess knowledge of him alone. No Jesus says that we need to do the will of his Father in heaven. In short, putting his words into practice.

So how do we measure up? Are we more like the wise builder who not only hears Jesus' words, but also put them into practice – or if we are being honest, are we more like the foolish one who was more intent to make sure that the house he was building appeared on the surface to be all sufficient - without really paying proper attention to what was supporting everything below.

It may even be that we have the kind of structure or foundation in our lives which is capable of withstanding some minor gale force winds, the odd thunderstorm, but little more. Jesus warns us that

one day a serious storm will come – a storm that will prove to be the ultimate test of what our foundations are made of.

So then, Jesus speaks in verse 24 of putting his words into practice. And I guess that good questions we should be asking are - what are these words and how can we be wise and put them into practice?

I think that the answer lies in the preceding three chapters in Matthew's gospel. The entire sermon Jesus has just preached has been full of challenging words – words that when put into practice – truly shape the followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus says:

- Let your light shine before men – standing out as followers of Christ in the world;
- Do not be angry with one another – settle disputes with each other quickly;
- Don't commit adultery – looking at women, or men with lust;
- Love your enemies;
- Be generous with what we have – be extravagantly generous with others;
- Don't be overwhelmed with worries in this life – trust in God who provides all our needs;

So putting this into practice – what might that look like?

Well, instead of feelings of hatred for the one who has wronged us – will I be willing to forgive....fully?

Instead of seeking revenge, will I instead look for reconciliation? That is what Jesus calls us to do.

Instead of being consumed with lust – will I act with integrity?

Instead of being deceitful, will I speak the truth?

Instead of judging people – will I seek their best interests?

It is hard to put Jesus' words into practice. It is often unfashionable and unpopular to put his words into action. The pull is so hard, the temptation so great. And yet, just as a father will warn his child of danger on account of his love for his child, so Jesus is warning us of the importance of obedience to him and his words.

Do we believe Jesus enough to not only hear what he's saying, but also put it into practice? Will we swim against the tide, maybe even compromise our friendships, family relationships – in order that our foundations may be found secure when it really matters?

You may feel that your life is built on sand. You may feel that you haven't been putting Jesus' words into practice. You may feel that, rather like that Tower of Pisa, you are just about to fall and there is no hope for you.

But it is not inevitable. Remember the leaning tower? In 1990 the Tower was closed because it was in danger of collapsing. An international team of architects and engineers gathered and got to work to solve the problem. It took them 12 years, \$25m to reduce the tilt by 45 centimetres. There is still a lean today, but not as acute. Once again, the tower is open to visitors and engineers say that it should last for at least another 200 years.

The foundations can be repaired, and mercifully, that is true for us too. Repair work can be done in our lives – Jesus Christ – the most loving person ever to walk on earth is telling us this story today, to warn us – yes – but to give the opportunity to listen to his words and put them into practice. That is to say to live lives that are obedient and honouring and glorifying to him – both now, and through into eternity with him.

