

*Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> February 2010. 10.30am Geoff Thorington-Hassell.*

**Building with Living stones: Forgiveness *Matthew 6:5-15***

### **Building Outreach and Belonging**

We spent a year (2009) laying foundations of what it means to be following in the footsteps of Jesus. Now we are building further, adding other bricks to the walls. We are building with living stones - which means people. We are building relationships using the principle of love of God, love for God's people (they are both interlinked) and love for neighbour, SOFA's

Strangers  
Outsiders  
Foreigners  
Aliens

(Which therefore includes the love of enemy).

We have spent two months looking at the Building as part of the Building Outreach and Belonging so we are half way through the first "third/ term". So lets have a pause and rewind first before looking at another aspect of building. The building is going to involve outreach adding stones and extending the kingdom through mercy, justice and telling of Jesus Then helping new living stones to belong and to contribute through service.

### **Recap Part One. What is being built?**

We looked at passages in *1 Peter, the Psalms Corinthians and Nehemiah*. We are building on Jesus as the one foundation (*1 Cor 3 9b-11*) yet it is not our building plan but God's. A plan drawn up and laid down before the foundation of the world (*Eph 1:4,5*). He is the foundation of all that God is doing through His death and resurrection. God will draw all creation (including humanity) to himself. Jesus is building a (new) redeemed community made up of living stones (those who become so in trusting Him as saviour and Lord. As we are building with God in this world He will redeem it and build it into a new heaven and earth.

This involves elements too of rebuilding and restoration. Just as *Nehemiah* was called to rebuild and restore the walls of Jerusalem and re set the gates. When we neglect our walls by making room for the things of the world to creep through the gaps. We do this by evaluating what's really going on. We start with prayer in looking for God's guidance and correction. This helps focus the rebuilding. This, however, needs to be linked to perseverance - worrying about it is not the same as "having a mind to work" and sticking at it whatever the next brick is for rebuilding the walls of our lives in:

Our relationships  
Our work place  
Our community  
Our church

Yet human beings have built many things throughout history. The historical temples mentioned in the bible have few remnants. *Solomon's Temple* got trashed by the Egyptians but also totally trashed by the Babylonians. *Ezekiel's* visionary temple was never built while the Second Temple, from the time of *Ezra and Nehemiah*, did at least last for 500 years whereas *Herod's* temple only lasted 6 years after completion before being spectacularly trashed by the Romans.

Jesus however uses the idea of what temples are usually used for to explain that we as human beings are like a temple for God - a place for God to dwell and live in by his Holy Spirit. We are those called out by God as a new community (the church) as the New Temple for God who comes to live within human beings.

## **Recap Part Two. How are we building?**

Temples should be places for prayer - for all nations ( *Matt 12:4*) not ( as with *Herod's* physical temple) a place of injustice, exploitation and idolatry but as living stones living holy lives . He is building a new people and His call to us is to build with him. It is the person of Jesus- the foundation of all that we are and do – that gives us unity and shared purpose – but the way we build is crucial. How we build needs to be with practical justice, “ to act justly to love mercy and walk in humble fellowship with God.”( *Micah 6:8*).

Linked to this is showing mercy- as the outward expression of compassion and pity – with the gentleness and practical kindness of Jesus Christ. Mercy is the mortar that holds the living stones together as they are built into a house where God can live by His Spirit.

Not least because our work will be tested and if we have built well we'll receive a reward. While we are all building on the same foundation there are many roles and we need to be sure whose plans we are following. For all that is good and true and righteous will be part of the new heaven and new earth. No living stone is rejected – each can be built into God's people and come and belong (1Peter 2:5 “ *come as living stones and let yourself be used.*”

We need therefore to be stuck together with a purpose. God is building a community of very different people learning how to relate to one another in shared and common purpose. If we don't work together, if we don't cooperate, the building will grow slower and discouragement and disappointment can set in.

So we need to get rid of all the things that contaminate God's building site (just as the Olympic site needed to have the soil either cleaned or cleared from its legacy of its industrial past). Suffering is an intrinsic part and test of how genuine our faith is and that love is the cement that holds the building together.

We have to decontaminate our relationships as we build - get rid of the things that demolish relationships and replace the time and energy wasted on this by craving the things that nourish and build up. Christ made a costly sacrifice to enable us to be part of this and our response is to live differently – thanking God for the good things in others.

To help us to do this we keep a strong look out on the “ walls”. Those things that give us a sense of security as well as clear boundaries as to the different areas and responsibilities the God has given us. To be vigilant in recognising those things that can undermine community from within (laziness and pride) and from outside (fear of ridicule, resentments and opposition). To understand the weak entry points in our lives that the enemy uses and have confidence that as we build and grow Jesus who describes himself as The Gate (*John 10:7.9*) gives us the strength and safety to carry on and move on and out.

## **Building with Living stones: Forgiveness**

### **The Sermon on the Mount**

And so we come to today. The book of *Matthew* is described by some as the “Gospel of the church”, partly this is because of the detail included in the book as to what it looks like and means to be part of God’s new community in following the way of Jesus. To get a clear pen portrait of what “Christ’s ones look like it will re-pay you to re-read carefully the *Sermon on the Mount* running here from *chapters 5 to 7* and the parallel *Sermon on the Plain in Luke Chapter 6*. These detail what Jesus is expecting of his followers. It is a tall order. Commentators have said that because the standards are so high it is an ideal, not to be achieved in this life. I don’t believe that. I think Jesus taught it not as something just to know about but do and be. The being and the doing go together. It is not just about what we do on the outside but that this reflects on what is true about the inside. In *Matthew* sin (which mars, destroys and hurts) is often related not to moral failure (thieving, sexual stuff we often associate it with) but hypocrisy. “We act what we are not”. There is lack of integrity and authenticity in who we are which we try to hide by what we do.

### **Living the right life.**

So we see this as we read Jesus drawing a number of comparisons and contrasts. For example there are three pictures of what people do to show they are religious. One of giving alms often as means of patronage. Do it in secret (says Jesus), not for show. “*then your Father who sees what you do in private will reward you.*” (6:4)

Or if you want to be really serious about living God’s priorities by fasting (6:16) you don’t need to make a production out of it – God knows. “Your Father who is unseen will know. And your Father whose sees what you do in private, will reward you.” (6:18b)

### **Prayer: A public private partnership**

So we come to the middle example in v5-15 on prayer. This however, has an added twist. Authenticity in private prayer is demonstrated in public relationships in communities. Often we fall into the trap of me and my God in talking about our secret, inner prayer life. Yet prayer is about an encounter with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and such encounters inevitably mean change. The disciple *John* at the end of his life wrote

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God, because God is love.”

So deeper prayer leads to deeper love as we get to know God better.

### **The Lord’s Prayer.**

We come back to this, what we call the “Lord’s prayer.” Chanting stuff is not the same as praying. Real prayer has real results. It also helps set ourselves in a proper perspective before God. Not least this is for corporate not private prayer particularly in its context and effects. This context also includes one of dependence. *John Stott* broke this prayer down into six “asks” or petitions. Three are about our passion for the glory of God (His name, kingdom and will), followed by three recognising our dependence on God’s grace (daily bread, forgiveness, and deliverance from evil). *Dependence is a fundamental attitude for all of us whenever we say the Lord’s prayer*, he writes. This insight is born more brightly by his being in old age (88) in his last book he observes, *we come into this world totally dependant on the love care and protection of others. We go through a phase of life when other people depend on us. And most of us go out of this world totally dependent on the love and care of others* (*The Radical Disciple* p112)

## **Burden bearers**

We are all of us designed to be a burden to others. You are designed to be a burden to me and I am designed to be a burden to you. One of these burdens, living inevitably in this new community and those communities around us is one of forgiveness. Both to be forgiven (which can be even harder than to forgive) and to forgive others.

In this regard the Lord's Prayer is misnamed. It should be called the "Disciples prayer". We need to know how to pray correctly in simplicity and directness

*"Forgive us the wrongs we have done as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us."*

## **Dependency Culture**

As we pray for God to meet our needs (not our greeds) and recognise our willing dependence on Him to be our provider. That we depend too on God as Protector to be spared exposure from hardships and hard testing that will make us vulnerable to falling into sin the meat in the sandwich is for help to sort out the sin in us and others. Sinner and sinned against. Exposing ourselves to living life rather than running away means we will hurt others and others will hurt us. Words are weapons. We wrong foot each other. We make mistakes. Others make mistakes with us. But if we want sincerity of prayer as Jesus disciples the challenge we face is insincerity in asking for forgiveness as an unforgiving disciple.

*Michal Green in his commentary put it this way It is not as though God petulantly says "I won't forgive you unless you forgive those who have wronged you" The fact is he cannot forgive us in these circumstances. For if we are to open our hands to receive his gracious pardon, we cannot keep our fists tightly clenched against those who have wronged us.*

*So (v14) If you forgive others the wrongs done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done.*

This reminds us of the parable of the unforgiving servant in response to *Peter's* perfectly fair question in *Matt 18 21-35* "If my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?"

Forgiving is not a prior condition to being forgiven by God but forgiveness cannot be a one-way process. Like all God's gifts it brings responsibility and it must be passed on. Otherwise it becomes hypocrisy. Yet we need to know and be reminded that our forgiving (as the parable makes clear) is tiny to what we have been forgiven.

Religion can draw very bitter roots of resentments in lives and communities because of perceived past wrongs, wrong words, inherited memories. It is because people are passionate and these things matter. It is not about apathy and neglect but unhealed wounds, which cause infection and pain. As living stones rather than "thick as a brick" we are none of us immune to these things. We depend on God. Disciples never get to the point where they do not need daily hourly, forgiveness in order to become what we are made for "to love God and enjoy him forever" And for that love to overflow we never get beyond having to pray with contrition and deep down sincerity "forgive us."

## **A supernatural law.**

Forgiveness may seem unfair. (To release, hurl away, to free.) It offers a way out. It does not settle all questions of blame or fairness (it evades these questions) but it does allow a relationship to start

over. To begin anew. The Russian dissident *Solzhenitsyn* remarked that this is what makes us different from all the animals. Not our capacity to think, but our capacity to repent and forgive. A most unnatural act which transcends the relentless laws of nature (*Yancey p98 "What's so amazing about Grace*). Justice has a good and righteous and rational level of power. The power of grace is different, unworldly, transforming, supernatural. Forgiveness undeserved and unearned can cut across the cords of guilt and recrimination. It can begin a thaw, which may (or may not) lead to pride and stubbornness being disarmed into confession.

### **Tying it together – moving on**

Having lived among us Jesus knows how hard this is. God surrendered his right to get even, choosing instead to bear the costs on his own body. So as *Paul in Corinthians* describes it “*God made him who has no sin, to be sin for us.*” Whose final words included “*Forgive them*” - All of them, the Roman soldiers, the religious leaders, the disciples who fled into the darkness – you and me (*p107 ibid Yancey*).“*Forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.*

Directly after the morning service we are moving into to time of prayer mentioned earlier. To tarry and wait for God for a while. To be tender hearted toward one another requires as we pray for each other a supernatural work of God's grace through the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we can relate like billiard balls (we simply bounce and collide and don't really connect and communicate) or as porcupines( we are aware of the spikes and try to avoid them). As we pray for others later who cannot pray for themselves in intercession we want that encounter with God in prayer to allow ourselves to be changed to become more of what God intended us to be so we may better arm our prayers for the world around us in seeing God's reign extended.

Let's pray.

### **Questions for Flame**

In building community why is forgiveness important?

How can a consistent and deepening personal life of prayer impact the quality of our relationships to those around us?