
Building the Temple



I remember when we had a farm in Dean's Marsh the next door neighbours let our cows escape. They said they closed the gate but there was no fence!
The gate was great but the foundation in this case was no good, a gate needs a fence.

I'm going to go back a bit and start with last week's reading. I think chapter three hangs together as a single argument.

For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?

What then is Apollos? What is Paul?

1 Corinthians 3:4-5 NRSV

The Corinthians think of themselves as a spiritually mature church; with all the spiritual gifts they need, well taught and self-sufficient. In fact they're quite similar to many churches today, maybe even BGAP. We can learn from Paul's letter to them.

We should never say I belong to St Mark's or I belong to St P&B. We should also not look back at previous ministers I belong to Russell, Don, Phil, or Elizabeth or Jim or John.

The Corinthian view of leadership comes from the world, we could be in just as much in trouble if we adopt that view.

The world's view of leadership is that the leader is the one who gives directions. He or she is the most important person in the organisation, they set the agenda, they determine what's important and what's not.

But the church isn't big business, the criteria are different.

Now of course, Paul isn't saying that we don't need leaders, we do and we in a few minutes we'll be praying for our new one.

The problem he's addressing here is the Corinthians are so focussed on the leaders that it seems to set them above even Jesus Christ.

So he asks what is Paul, what is Apollos? Not who, notice, but what?

What are they there for? Well, in the Church they're there as servants.

So who or what matters most? Neither. As he says in v7:

but only God... gives the growth.

1 Corinthians 3:7

They are in fact fellow servants of the one God. Equal in importance and value.

Now take a few seconds to look around you today. What do you see? I hope you see not just a bunch of old people but a team of workers called by God to work together to grow his church (both here & the other end).

We're all important members of God's workforce.

There are no part-time Christians in the Church; or at least there shouldn't be.

Some of us are the ones who plant the seed of the gospel, others water the seed, maybe you nurture the plant through encouragement or discipleship. Maybe your task is helping with the supporting structures the stake the plant is tied to (i.e the buildings and finances)

But without all of those tasks being accomplished (whether it's your job, my job, it doesn't matter) the plant (or the church) won't thrive. In fact it could wither and die.

Do you not know that you (all) are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

1 Corinthians 3:16 NRSV

We're God's building, we are HIS temple.

So what does a building need if it's to be well built?

Well, first we need a good architect to design the structure, to make sure that the structure will be sound and especially to make sure that the foundations are sound and the design is solid.

Then we need an expert builder and tradespeople who'll follow the design correctly, who'll apply the appropriate skills to their task, who'll use the right tools and the right material to build a solid structure that won't fall down in the first strong wind or that won't leak if we get heavy rain.

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it.

1 Corinthians 3:10 NRSV

That's not far off the picture of OUR church here, is it?

It's a building that continues to be built with every new generation. And looking back you can see how sometimes the metaphorical walls have begun to sag or the roof has begun to leak, attendance is down, money is tight. Why?

Maybe it's because someone has tried to build on a different foundation and the structure has become a bit wonky. Or someone has said or done something, introduced some new principal that's undermined the foundation.

So what is the foundation we should be building on?

Some Corinthians thought it was Paul and his preaching. Others thought it was the law. Still others thought it was the eloquence of Apollo.

What foundation is BGAP built on? Is it the sense of community we feel here? Is it the op shop and the welcome centre? Is it our Anglican liturgy? Those comfortable prayers that we know by heart?

If it is we're just as confused as the Corinthians. No, there's only one foundation on which the church can be built with any confidence:

that foundation is Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 3:11 NRSV

Whenever we hear something new, or try a new thing, we should ask: is it, at its foundation, centred on Jesus Christ, and his death, and his resurrection?

Is it coming to us with God's power or with the power of public opinion?

Let's face it, public opinion is a fickle thing at best, just listen to talk back radio. But the power of God through Jesus Christ is rock solid.

Let's think about the sorts of alternatives that people may try.

Often they try to reinterpret the scriptures to make them more palatable. There are things in this Book that they don't like, that they think sound unfair or unpalatable to our modern minds. The sound silly or foolish:

the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

1 Corinthians 1:18 NRSV

In the 21st century, we don't need God — I'm a big Star Trek fan and one of the big themes behind that is that human thinking, human endeavour can achieve anything.

We just have to work harder at bringing peace to our world, follow the golden rule. Look around and you can see how successful that has been.

Some try to adapt their faith to the modern worldview, all that does is to dilute or undermine your faith to the point where we may as well just be a social club.

So the warning is there. Make sure you stick to the true foundation that God has given us. If we're to build God's Church together we need to build it on the one foundation of Jesus Christ, seeking a unity that comes from having that and only that foundation.

Playing with fire

By the way, notice God understands the way humans operate. So he offers us incentives for faithful service. We're told we'll each receive a reward for our effort. But our heavenly reward will be determined by the quality of our building here on earth.

You see, there's a stern warning here for us.

Be careful how you build because it'll be tested by fire. And be careful too, because the fire he's talking about isn't the last day.

Shoddy work won't last, we need to be build with solid material.

It's no good building something out of light timber or cardboard then plastering over it so it looks solid. That sort of building crumples at the first bit of pressure. And the church is under constant pressure, now as much as ever.

So the question is, will it survive, or will it crumble?

Will what we build stand up to those pressures. What will determine that? Isn't it whether it's been built on the right foundation and with solid materials?

If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward.

I want to reassure you though that if we try (but fail) our salvation is not at stake, as long as we stick to the Foundation of Jesus!

If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.

1 Corinthians 3:14-15 NRSV

But look what happens if anyone should not just build badly but destroy part of God's church, by abandoning the foundation that is Christ, **they will face the judgement of God.**

If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

1 Corinthians 3:17 NRSV

So those who by their false teaching lead people away from Christ are actually damaging not just a few individuals' faith, but the temple of God.

So who do we belong to?

Not Paul,

not Peter

or Apollos,

not St Mark's

or St P/B,

not even the Anglican Church.

For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

1 Corinthians 3:21-23 NRSV

Here is true wisdom. If you're on God's side it doesn't matter who else is on your side or not. You're with the winning team. So first get the foundations right and the rest will follow naturally. Lets work together as servants, building on the one foundation, Jesus Christ, so as to build up the church in unity according to God's wisdom, not human wisdom.