

Dear Friends, welcome to my 40th thought for the week during lockdown.

The parable of the wise and foolish builders in *Matthew Chapter 7 Verses 24-27* serves as the conclusion of what most people consider to be the greatest sermon ever preached; Jesus' famous "Sermon on the Mount".

The sermon on the Mount is filled with theological gems; *'the Beatitudes', 'the Lord's Prayer', "Seek first the kingdom of God", "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven"..."for where your treasure is, there your heart shall be also";* just to name a few. And then the sermon ends with an illustration, a simple, but profound story of two men who each built a house. And the story begs each of us to ask ourselves this question, "What kind of foundation are we building on?' are our churches building on?.

This story is not just a story for carpenters, roofers, plumbers and bricklayers. Jesus a carpenter Himself used an illustration that would have been quite familiar to Him. But He wasn't talking about building a literal house. He was really talking about building a life that is meaningful, a life worth living. We could certainly apply it to marriages and families and in the context of our worship, churches and communities too.

This is a story that can also be very helpful to anyone trying to build a household. And because the New Testament, more than once, talks about the church as the household of faith we can apply it to building a ministry, be it a congregational ministry or a personal one. In fact, most of us here today, are probably trying to build all three or have done so in the past. We're building a family, and we want that family to be stable and strong and full of joy and love. And we're building a ministry, 'a church'. We're trying to discover and grow and use the gifts God has given us so we can make an eternal difference in the lives of others.

In all these cases this parable has great relevance, if we want to build a life, or a household, a ministry or a church or a community that will last, that will stand the test of time, that will make a difference.

The wise and foolish builders built on different foundations. The wise man built his house on a rock The foolish man built his house on the sand. And why would anyone do that?

I don't know very much about house building. But even I can see that that's not a very good idea. Why would anyone build a house on sand? And, the answer is simple really. Digging a foundation in the rock is very hard work. Digging in to the sand is a piece of cake. Putting a foundation in the rock is costly. Laying a foundation in the sand doesn't cost nearly as much. Digging a foundation in the rock takes a long time, but you can put a foundation in the sand rather quickly. And building a life or a marriage or a family or a ministry or a church or a community on sand is far more tempting than you might think it is, building these kinds of houses takes hard work too and has a cost.

The temptation to take shortcuts is always there. But no matter how hard it is or how costly it is or how much time it takes, it is worth it! It's worth it because of the results.

The two men both had the same vision. They had the same dreams - the same plans. They both wanted to build a good house, a solid house, a house that would last. And that's important to see because it reminds us that good intentions are not enough, we need to be listeners as well as doers.

The biggest contrast of all between these two builders was in the results. The house of the foolish man fell; in fact, it doesn't just say it fell or even that it fell with a crash. It fell with a great crash! But the house of the wise man stood firm, which brings us full circle, back to the question I asked at the beginning, "What kind of foundation are we building on?" Are our lives, our marriage, our family, our ministry, our churches, and our community - on rock or on sand? And for that matter, how will we know?

Well sometimes in our lives we face storms and when these storms whether it be literal or figurative storms of every day life we can really learn whether we're truly relying on God's word and promises or just listening to them. And Jesus knows that the only kind of life or marriage or family or ministry or churches or communities that stand up against any storm, is the one that is built on him - on his love, his mercy, his peace and his hope.

Jesus knows what a solid rock foundation looks like better than anyone. Not because of His carpentry experience, but because of His cross experience. One of the most incredible moments of the cross for me is when Jesus cries out, just before his death, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

What is so amazing to me about that is that, just moments earlier He said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" What a storm! But Jesus trusted the Father, even when "the storm to end all storms" came.

And His resurrection proved that, that was exactly the right thing to do. And if Jesus could do it then, we can do it now by His grace, no matter what storms we're facing in our lives today. There's no better foundation than that.

In Matthew chapter 16 verse 18 Jesus said *"and I tell you, "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it"*.

I've mentioned several times in my weekly thoughts that the three churches I work with here in Blackburn are part of a Missional Partnership of twelve churches. Each of those churches are of different ages and make up, all with a tremendous amount of history between them and all have a common aim 'to share the good news of the Gospels in both word and actions'.

If when they built these churches and the foundations weren't strong, then the buildings would have fallen down and if the people involved throughout the years hadn't had the vision of developing the church and hadn't laid the foundations for any development to take place then we wouldn't be here today.

When these churches were founded and when our two denominations (United Reformed and Methodist churches) were founded those involved would have had different hopes and expectations as to how the church might develop and what sort of image it should have.

Over the past few years and now particularly during the Pandemic all denominations both nationally and locally have been asking the same questions as I'm sure were asked all those years ago. Questions such as why we come to church, why we worship the way we do, why we do things the way we do, what our hopes are for the Church here in our part of God's Kingdom and one question I'm often asked as I go about my ministry is "Why so many denominations and buildings?"

The foundations of our churches are still strong, however we have discovered that cracks are beginning to appear. Not cracks in the foundations but in terms of cracks in the fabric, ageing congregations, dwindling finances and numbers with the same people having to take on more and more responsibilities and a shortage of ministry with churches having to share ministry with more and more churches.

We share common ground and have a common creed but things have certainly changed as a result of the pandemic and as it says in Isaiah 43 *"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?"*

Our churches were all built on a vision, a vision of carrying out God's Mission of sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those who would listen and as a partnership we have a wonderful opportunity to build on that vision together, an opportunity to take the Church forward as restrictions begin to ease and we begin to worship in our churches again, but things will be different and we need to find "new ways of being church" which are relevant to today.

In the words of a hymn *'God has set us on a journey to discover dream and grow and exploration brings new insights, changes choices we must face'*.

This week I'd like you to think about the following questions;

Look at the congregation you have and together ask these questions:

Why has God put me in this church, with these people, in this place, at this time?

What is God saying to the church at this time?

and finally what kind of foundation does He want us to build upon?

Let us pray,

May God help each of us to discern His will and just as Jesus is the rock solid foundation of the church may He also be the rock solid foundation of our lives and our decision making. **Amen.**

Until next time, keep well and keep safe,
Shalom my friends, Shalom.