

Wise and Foolish Builders

Matthew 7:24-29.

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.

The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

Last week I wondered if I should speak about the devastating events we had seen on TV that week, but felt I didn't have time to properly digest it and search the scriptures, so when I looked at the passage for this week and saw what it was about, it looked like the Lord's leading that we should reflect on these disasters this Sunday.

In recent month we have watched on TV the terrible floods in Australia, an earthquake that devastated the centre of Christchurch in New Zealand, we have heard about the food shortages in East Africa due to the crop failures and water sources drying up because of lack of rain, we have watched as one North African country after another have ousted dictatorial leaders and wondered how the Libyan crisis will end. Then to top it all there was the devastating massive earthquake and the ensuing tsunami that has wiped out over ten thousand Japanese and made over half a million homeless. What is going on? How do we process such information? As we considered together on Wednesday evening, how on earth do we pray about such matters?

So before we get into this morning's passage, let's turn to a few other scriptures to get the bigger picture. In Matt 24 we read *“The disciples came to Jesus privately. “Tell us,” they said, “what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” Jesus answered: You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth-pains.”*

Today we see continuing warfare many countries living with conflicts, an increase in the numbers of earthquakes (20-30 across the globe every day) and frequent famines in various parts of the world, despite all our advances in technology. This is exactly what Jesus predicted. If you read on in Matthew 24 you will see that things

on planet earth are going to get worse and worse until Jesus returns. His return will be the only thing that stops the whole world facing total devastation. But after his coming he will burn everything up with fire and out of the purged remains he will recreate a new heaven and earth on which we will live with him forever. Peter tells us *“the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.”*

When we see such terrible disasters and hardship we often hear people ask if God is a God of love why does he allow such terrible things to happen? God truly is love - but we have to understand how God's love works. Because the whole human race has rebelled against God and has asserted our independence from God, God has no option but to leave us to our own devices and allow the world to disintegrate around us. Before the fall, the earth and everything on it was in perfect equilibrium. The world would have continued perfectly for ever and we would have lived for ever. Our human bodies would have continually regenerated themselves as God did not allow degeneration or decay. But God's judgment on the world, because of Adam's sin, was to withdraw his presence from this planet. The result was that the principle of disorder, decay, degeneration and death now affects everything. Scientists call this entropy. We see how god-given life in every living creature tries to hold back disorder and bring order into things. As playwright and Czech president Václav Havel once wrote *“Just as the constant increase of disorder is the basic law of the universe, so it is the basic law of life to be ever more highly structured and to struggle against disorder.”* But disorder will always ultimately win. The life in every one of us that struggles against disorder, will eventually succumb to decay and we will die. Time after time we see earthquakes, tsunamis, floods and droughts, crop failures and other disasters continually afflicting the human race and defeating us and destroying us. It will be so until the Lord returns, getting worse and worse. We stand stunned as we watch the most technologically developed nation in the world helpless in the face of 'the forces of nature' that swept over them and destroyed everything in its path. It is no coincidence that *tsunami* is a Japanese word.

In reading the scriptures to prepare for this I came across a salutary chapter: Isaiah 24. I won't read it all out but let's look at a few verses.

(v5-13 Message)

Earth is polluted by its very own people,
who have broken its laws,
Disrupted its order,
violated the sacred and eternal covenant.

Therefore a curse, like a cancer,
ravages the earth.
Its people pay the price of their sacrilege.
They dwindle away, dying out one by one.
No more wine, no more vineyards,
no more songs or singers.
The laughter of castanets is gone,
the shouts of celebrants, gone,
the laughter of fiddles, gone.
No more parties with toasts of champagne.
Serious drinkers gag on their drinks.
The chaotic cities are unlivable. Anarchy reigns.
Every house is boarded up, condemned.
People riot in the streets for wine,
but the good times are gone forever—
no more joy for this old world.
The city is dead and deserted,
bulldozed into piles of rubble.
That's the way it will be on this earth.
This is the fate of all nations:
An olive tree shaken clean of its olives,
a grapevine picked clean of its grapes.

Friends we live in a comparatively safe part of the globe. We have earthquakes, all pretty small, we have not lived with war since 1945, we have had a few hosepipe bans because of lack of rain but have more than enough food and water and our worst disasters have been caused by flooding and terrorism, but comparatively few have lost their lives. We can feel quite smug and live with the delusion of security and safety. Only the Lord knows whether there will be a day when our bubble will burst and some unforeseen catastrophe will hit the UK. We do not live, as the Japanese do, with a constant prepared awareness of possible destructive forces being unleashed upon them. We can be all too blasé about things.

So back to our passage. There are two men who build their houses; one builds on sand, with no foundations and one builds on rock with solid foundations. Life goes on and everyone is happy until the catastrophe comes. As we have seen on TV those buildings with strong foundations withstood the tsunami but thousands of ordinary

houses were washed away like matchsticks. Life in this world will randomly throw disasters at us; how will we stand up?

Jesus says that those **who take notice of his words and live their lives accordingly** are like those with deep foundations and will be able to survive disasters. But those **who do not take notice of his words and live their lives accordingly** are like those with no foundations and when disaster strikes their lives collapse with a great crash! This is the most important thing that Jesus says in this story.

We talk about 'being saved'. Are you saved? Saved from what? Ultimately we are saved from God's judgement when we die, but being saved is also being taken out of this world that is destined for destruction and being transferred into God's Kingdom that the writer to the Hebrews say 'cannot be shaken'. Are you saved? Have you been transferred out of the dominion of the Evil One and been transferred into the Kingdom of the Son that the Father loves, because of what he did for us on the cross? If so, this gives us a hope and confidence whatever life throws at us. Believers can have resilience and faith that can get them through the most difficult of circumstances. We have God with us, on our side and we do not have anything to fear, which is why Jesus says "see to it that you are not alarmed."

I have been deeply impressed by the reactions of the Japanese to this worst tragedy in all of Japan's history. They are a traumatised nation but their stoical ability to patiently queue for hours for a handful of rice and to quietly get up and put it behind them and start rebuilding the future is quite impressive. They call this *gaman* - to persist, to patiently take whatever comes, to tough it out, to endure with fortitude, self-control and dignity. A 33 yr old Japanese taxi driver said "*Gaman is the way of life. That's what they teach you ever since you're born -- that if you persevere, you'll make it.*" "*Uncomplaining, collective resilience is steeped into the Japanese soul.*" It is something like the British 'stiff upper lip' but massively more so. It binds the nations together in and has already seen many Japanese clearing up and rebuilding work begin and amazing fortitude in the face of personal devastation.

There is a similarity between *gaman* and the important biblical concept of perseverance, endurance, patient continuance. But *gaman* is motivated from a totally different viewpoint to biblical perseverance. The Japanese do not believe in any supreme God. For them the kami, their closest word for God, represents a whole host of spirits; ancestral spirits, spirits of nature and malevolent spirits that we would call demons. There is no one being – but a sort of spiritual force composed of many spiritual entities. Many will have been praying to the kami, in Shinto and Buddhist shrines, to help them overcome such a terrible catastrophe and to persevere with fortitude, self-control and dignity, as their ancestors did.

Sadly Japanese *gaman* is perseverance without the Lord, it is purely human corporate self-effort. But can you imagine the power of godly determination, persistence and fortitude? Japan is in a one of the most dangerous earthquake zones on earth facing earthquakes of varying magnitudes every day, but with *gaman* they tough it out and live without fear. As I was praying over this message it came strongly to mind that this is an illustration of the Kingdom of God.

- We live in a spiritual earthquake zone. Everything around us gets shaken from time to time. But we are not to fear. However much our lives get shaken up, we belong to God's kingdom, which we are told cannot be shaken and if we endure or persevere, we will have the power from the Holy Spirit to take all the troubles and come out the other side secure and stronger. And should we die in the process, we can be sure that we will go to be with the Lord to wait for the new heaven and earth.

- We live in a spiritual war zone; spiritual warfare rages all around us. But we are told to be on the alert, to watch and pray and to fight to good fight of faith. This is a sort of Christian *gaman*, enduring with fortitude, self-control and dignity, not fearing the Evil One but resisting him firm in our faith and he will flee from us, and also we are told that in Christ we are more than conquerors.

- We live in the midst of a community dying of spiritual hunger and thirst. But we have the bread of life, we have the water of life; we will never starve spiritually even if we were to die physically of hunger or thirst. But it is not only for us – we have received the water of life and bread of life to share with those who are spiritually dying all around us. Can we keep it to ourselves?

So the question that Jesus' story challenges each of us with is “**do we take notice of Jesus' words and live our lives accordingly?**”

We have looked at Jesus earlier words about how to pray, not laying up treasure on earth, but in heaven, about asking for the Holy Spirit, about forgiving, not worrying, not judging and many other things. Do we take notice of these things? Do we take the words of Jesus seriously? And do we live our lives accordingly? Living with faith and trust in Jesus and what he teaches us is the only recipe for a stable life that can tough it out when spiritual tsunamis hit, as they will.

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