

A Living Building

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 01] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 17th of November 2002. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled A Living Building and is based on 1 Corinthians chapter 3 verses 1 to 23.

Amen.

An early dream that would recur was that the roof didn't match. The old roof and the new roof and there was a gap between them and the rain came in.

Probably wouldn't matter actually because we don't have rain anymore so it probably wouldn't matter. Or I had another dream, a nightmare, that the floors don't match. So you're walking along the old floor and all of a sudden the new floor is way up here or down here or there's actually a gap between the two down to the earth and the worms or whatever else is down there.

[1 : 26] I had an alarming nightmare one night recently when I suddenly thought and during the night kept waking up thinking we haven't planned for an instant boiling water system in the kitchen. How on earth will we have cups of tea on Sundays?

And so the next day rang up to check and yes there are actually two of them. My latest nightmare is that the new building is too small and we're going to have to do it all again, digger.

Or that no one's going to turn up on the opening day. Or that the whole thing will just collapse on the 30th of November. Well it's 13 days and I guess I'll be able to sleep a bit better then.

Of course it could be a disaster. Some days when I'm here checking things with the builder, there are on site architects, engineers, electricians, plumbers, painters, carpet layers, concreters, stonemasons, stained glass window experts, tilers, cabinet makers, glaziers, labourers, joiners, carpenters and the vicar and there might be others that I haven't yet identified.

And I guess if all of those people all on site together are not in some way coordinated and joining their efforts together then my nightmares will come true and we'll know that very soon.

[2 : 45] But even going back to the beginning, of the building project, if the foundation to start with was not right then disaster will come as well. And again, my nightmares will come true and probably the first time we get some heavy rain.

Which may be well beyond the end of my lifetime anyway. Well thankfully the Bible actually gives us directions about how to build a church building. And here they are in 1 Corinthians 3.

I realise that we could have saved a lot of money not having to deal with architects. All I needed to do was copy out these verses, give them to the building company and we'd be home and home so I wouldn't need to have any nightmares at all.

Like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid.

That foundation is Jesus Christ. And in fact this Bible passage showing us how to build a church building actually tells us what materials to use as well in the next verses. If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw the work of each builder will become visible for the day will disclose it because it will be revealed with fire and the fire will test what sort of work each has done.

[4 : 00] Well who needs an architect when you've got these words in 1 Corinthians chapter 3. So I read these passages to the builders a while ago. We sacked the architects. We've saved lots of money.

Theo, the site manager's office is plastered with copy of 1 Corinthians 3. He's thrown out the architects' plans and I joke. If coordination and a right foundation are important for a church building they are no less important for the building of the real church.

The people of God. For the church of God of course is people not a building of stone or concrete, steel or stained glass. Sometimes people say to me your church it's not my church, it's God's but your church or Holy Trinity it's a beautiful church.

And I often respond along the lines of well you know some of them are pretty ugly. Oh no I mean the building. I say well that's nothing. The church, some of them are ugly some are beautiful.

That doesn't really matter. Sometimes people say you know you've got a nice church here and I respond yes they are lovely. And they say no I mean the building. And again I say that the people are what matters not the building.

[5 : 21] And that's Paul's point here in 1 Corinthians 3. And his instructions here are not about building a building of bricks and stone and gold and precious stones and silver and so on. He's actually on about the building of the church of God the people of God. And in the end that is what matters. Paul started the church in Corinth some time before he wrote this letter to the Corinthians.

We read about that in the Acts of the Apostles chapter 18. It was part of Paul's missionary journey. Corinth is west of Athens in southern Greece on what's called the Peloponnese.

A significant city in the ancient world. A metropolis a trading centre a religious centre and a fairly immoral place to boot. And Paul acknowledges his role starting the church when he says in verse 10 that like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation.

Someone else is building on it meaning that Paul has since left Corinth continued to various other places planting churches and preaching the gospel and continued on his way leaving the church entrusted to other leaders.

[6 : 33] Someone else is building on his foundation that's not a problem. Paul's role was laying the foundation. The foundation is not one with concrete not one where you have to go down to bedrock not one like ours here where we had to do some special compaction tests on the soil because it was a bit loose and soft because of composted tree roots and so on.

The foundation that Paul has in mind for the church the real church that is he says in verse 11 is Jesus Christ. There are all sorts of views about Jesus Christ today but Paul doesn't have any view about Jesus Christ in mind.

He has a particular theology understanding of Jesus Christ who he was and what he did and that is the foundation. It's not just anybody claiming to do something in the name of Jesus Christ whatever it is whoever they believe he is that matters.

It's getting Jesus Christ right that matters for the foundation of the real church. And you see what he says here refers back to the previous two chapters where he makes it very clear what his understanding is of Jesus Christ who he was and what he did.

For example look back to chapter 1 verse 18 it is the message about the cross that is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

[8 : 07] It is the cross of Jesus Christ his death or crucifixion on the cross that is central to the gospel that is the power to save and build the church.

Not a Jesus who is just a nice bloke a good teacher a bit of a miracle worker or an ancient guru it is Jesus who died on the cross to bring power for salvation that lies at the foundation of the people of God.

Look on to verse 23 Paul says we proclaim Christ crucified not any old Jesus not any view of Jesus that denies his divinity or denies his purpose denies his death or resurrection we preach Christ crucified a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles but to those who are the call both Jews and Greeks Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God and again look on to chapter 2 verse 2 I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified there's the foundation of the church not concrete but Jesus Christ and him crucified for it is the death or crucifixion of Jesus that provides the power for salvation for any person Jew or Greek and thus to be incorporated into the people of God the real church the living building or church yes it is foolishness to the world

Paul says it's not a message that the world is aghast by its complexity or beauty usually the world of Paul's day as ours thinks the cross of Christ is foolish it's a stumbling block to Jews it remains a stumbling block to people today now the church in Corinth as Paul writes this letter is vulnerable to all sorts of problems not least infighting and division caused by jealousies it had a guru mentality about its leaders hence our non-drama just before it was boastful in its spiritual gifts and thus divided it was immoral in its behaviour and condoned immorality it was struggling to grow into spiritual maturity and was still like spiritual infancy in the diet of theology that it had it was therefore vulnerable to false teachers and false teaching and false theology all of those issues are faced in this letter very clearly in other chapters the foundation has been laid by Paul the gospel of Christ and Christ crucified and that alone is the only solid foundation for any church anywhere anytime any place but now it seems that what is being built on that foundation is in danger of being regarded as worthless for the analogy that Paul uses about building with gold silver precious stones or wood hay and straw seems to imply that the

Corinthian leadership is actually building on Paul's foundation with things that will just be destroyed on the final day the analogy is a building with wood hay straw things that will be consumed in fire rather than precious and lasting things gold silver and precious stones again he's not talking about a physical building he's talking about people but he's using the analogy of a physical building to describe the building of the real church for people of God and the final day he describes in verse 13 onwards the work of each builder will become visible for the day notice the capital letter day that is it's referring to the day when Jesus returns this world is judged this world is rolled up and the new heavens and the new earth come on that day what is built on the foundation will be disclosed because it will be revealed with fire and the fire will test what sort of work each has done if what has been built on the foundation survives the builder will receive a reward if the work is burned up the builder will suffer loss the builder will be saved but not on fire like we saw in Caulfield overnight but rather the people of God standing or not standing on that final day when Christ returns and judges the world and the only thing that will enable the church the people of God to stand on that final day that testing day when

[13 : 01] Jesus Christ returns to judge this world the only thing that will enable anyone to stand on that day is the gospel of Christ crucified for we stand because of him and him alone and no other reason at all what is the power to save from that day Christ crucified not worldly wisdom which is what the Corinthian leadership was chasing after it seems in this letter not the latest spiritual guru or spiritual technique a foolish message Christ crucified that is the power to save that is the power to enable the church to stand on that final day when Jesus returns as some of you know I'm what's called an archdeacon which is likened to a rottweiler in the church I go around growling at other churches one of the churches in what's called my archdeaconry is bitterly divided its previous booker did not believe that Jesus was the son of God divine to be worshipped he believed instead that he was just a good man like many other good men and believed that anybody and everybody regardless of who they are what they do or what they think will end up in heaven it seemed to me that he was building on a foundation with wood hay and straw and those who were influenced by his teaching would not stand on that final day indeed I wonder really whether he's even building on the foundation of

Christ at all but now the new get-go has arrived in recent times holding to the gospel of Christ crucified and fighting a very difficult battle for the sake of the eternal souls of that church in effect that person is trying to build a church with his stand on the final day suffering all sorts of opposition from those who do not believe that Jesus was divine and refuse to even say decree apart from the first line because they believe nothing else of it there are too many churches that are building with wood hay and straw they are a fire waiting to happen and days of total fire ban are false assurance for them and let me say too that there are plenty in the church in any denomination let me say not just Anglican who regard Bible believing gospel Christians evangelicals that is like us as being foolish and lightweight simplistic faith needing to grow up into the full mystery of Christian truth or as naive fundamentalists who are ignorant of the complexities of spiritual things there are some in the Anglican church who I'm sure regard me like that the real test is the final day it's not about whether you build a new building now it's not about how many people are in church each Sunday it's about whether they will stand on the final day or not and it is my aim and attempt to keep on as best

I can under the grace of God to build with the materials Paul built with on the foundation he laid knowing that it will be a stumbling block to some knowing that it will be foolishness to many and therefore become the object of ridicule but on the final day it is Christ and Christ crucified alone that gives us the power to stand and endure that day we sing a song occasionally that has these words in Christ alone my hope is found he is my light my strength my song this cornerstone this solid ground firm through the fiercest drought and storm what heights of love what depths of peace when fears are stilled when strivings cease my comforter my all in all here in the love of Christ

I stand in Christ alone who took on flesh fullness of God in helpless day this gift of love and righteousness scorned by the ones he came to save till on that cross as Jesus died the wrath of God was satisfied for every sin on him was laid here in the death of Christ I live the building surveyor is due this week to test our buildings and hopefully to give certificates to approve their occupancy but on the final day when Jesus returns if not already before then this building will be consumed by crime of that final day the stone will disappear the steel will melt

I don't expect much of this old and new building to remain on that day at all but on that day the real church will stand and keep standing people built on the foundation of Christ and on that day the work of each builder will become visible for the day will disclose it because it will be revealed with fire and the fire will test what sort of work each has done and it's on that day that the real test of my work as a minister will occur all too often we take too lightly the church we don't attend if we're busy or tired or there's something better on TV too often our Bible study groups are optional extras for when we're in good moods and broken relationships within church fellowship we don't seem to care too often about we don't exercise our minds as we ought to get the gospel straight we lack up simple war milk theology that there conveys an influence in the faith we can't be bothered chewing on spiritual meat

[20 : 01] Paul begins chapter 3 of this letter to the Corinthians urging the Corinthian church to grow up to stop their infants just lapping up spiritual milk but to move on to the real spiritual meat and food their spiritual immaturity and weakness is reflected in their divisions their jealousies and strife in their attraction for one leader over another their guru mentality for Christian leadership brothers and sisters I could not speak to you as spiritual people but rather as people of the flesh Paul says as infants in Christ I fed you with milk but not solid food but you are not ready for solid food but even now you're still not ready for you are still of the flesh for as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you are you not of the flesh and behaving according to human inclinations for when one says I belong to a Paul and another I belong to a Paulus are you not nearly human that sort of division that Paul is countering in the church in Corinth is dangerous indeed all too many churches suffer from that sort of jealousy division and spiritual immaturity the church of Corinth in the first century was not alone

Paul is addressing the Corinthian church just like the magistrate addressed Gary Udler this week grow up stop being a stupid child but the real danger of the divisions and immaturity within the Corinthian church is that it is destroying the real church the living temple of God indwelt by God's spirit that's what Paul then is referring to in verse 16 do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you if anyone destroys God's temple God will destroy that person for God's temple is holy and you are that temple now those verses are a severe warning but they tell us that God is not blasé about the local church God is passionate about it he cares deeply for the local church and when he says in verse 17 if anyone destroys God's temple God will destroy that person it is the warning of a loving protector of a man who might say to a thug who's threatening his wife you touch her you lay one hand on her and I will smash your facing that's what

God is saying here to anyone who is seeking to destroy the temple of God but what is most insidious is that he's addressing the Corinthian leaders who by their immaturity and division are showing that they are actually seeking to destroy the temple of God that is the living church of God's people this is a severe warning a warning to immature Christians a warning to factional Christians a warning to weak Christians a warning to those who don't care enough for the local church bought at such precious place by Jesus death it is a warning to us too see we live in a highly individualistic age and despite our craving for authentic community as witnessed by TV programs like Cheers and Friends and Neighbours and so on we just want to do our own thing we want to do what's comfortable for us what we enjoy and if we feel like it we might be part of it and if we don't feel like it we won't we sit very lightly or far too lightly to the local church but God is passionate about it and he threatens anyone who seeks to destroy it with the destruction he will bring on them

God doesn't take the local church lightly at all and nor ought we for when we take it lightly sit loosely to it sit within it with broken relationships or with jealousies and factions and struggle we've got guru leaders so we go when one leader preaches and not another and so on we are acting with the spiritual immaturity that the Corinthians were acting with and we stand under the same severe warning as they did as well so if we are to stand as the living church on that final day the foundation must be right Christ and him crucified for there alone is the power to say and the power to stand on that final day but more than that we are to grow in spiritual maturity built on that solid foundation of the gospel of Christ and that means built together not as an individual built in place but together as a living church a local church built together on that shore foundation one of the most fascinating jobs of our building project is underway at the moment it's the stonework on the outside of that fire wall behind me they are cut pieces of stone about an inch thick it's like a massive jigsaw puzzle and it is in effect the external cladding on a steel and concrete brick type wall in one sense it is a facade but it's very slow work have a look at it later if it's lightened the work has already taken something like nine working days or ten working days it's probably got another seven eight or nine to go it may only just be finished before the opening day but each of those stone cut slabs needs to be trimmed in order to fit next to other ones that are around it and there's a sense in which that's what it is being built together as a Christian church that is as we come together we rub our rough edges against each other ideally trimming ourselves and being trimmed by others so that we are fitting together better and better as the living church of God well the analogy in the end breaks down as all analogies do but the point is that built on the foundation of Christ and him crucified is not an individual life but the corporate life of the church for it is the church that is

God's temple and it is the church that is indwelt by God's spirit yes it's true in other parts of the scriptures that an individual has within them God's spirit if they are Christian but Paul's understanding here is much more corporate than that it is the Christian church together that is indwelt by God's spirit and if the Christian church is to grow into Christian maturity it does so together not individualistically well it's 13 days to the building opening 13 more sleepless nights and nightmares it's an enormous project I'm convinced it's worth doing we want no congratulations for it because the real test is not the building opened on the 30th of November in a beautiful carpet or comfortable fuse the real test is not this week when the building surveyor comes the real test is not even what parishioners think the criticisms are already coming the real test is not whether we can fill all the new views and therefore build again the real test comes on the final day when the real church the living church stands on the day when

[28 : 01] Jesus returns the buildings will be either long gone by then or consumed on that day by fire but who will stand then on the foundation of Christ one of my dear friends in England is dying six weeks ago she was well with a slight cough she has terminal cancer and may not live for a year for the years when I lived in England she and her husband were very good friends of mine indeed I rang her last Monday to say goodbye not knowing how long she had left to live and she said to me in very comforting words she looks forward to standing before Jesus Christ and entering heaven confident because of him not her and being able to welcome Christian friends when it is their turn to arrive there that is someone whose foundation is Jesus

Christ built into the church of God's people and confident because of Christ and he crucified confident in a message that the world finds foolish a shield who soon will fight has the power to save all eternity