

“WHAT KIND OF CHRISTIAN?”

4. With foundations in Christ

Luke 6:46-49

I remember when I was a child going on holiday to a little village on the coast of south Devon called Beesands. It's one of those villages where there's only one way in and out – right at the end of the road, with nothing but sea beyond. We used to stay in a B&B in one of the houses that was just back from the sea, sturdily built behind a fairly substantial sea wall of rocks and concrete. A mile along the coastal footpath or several miles round the lanes, there had been another village called Hallsands, built close to the edge of the sandy cliffs. On 26th January 1917, a very high tide and a strong east wind washed pretty well of it away. If you'd been walking along the Devon coast on 25th January 1917 you'd have said Hallsands and Beesands both looked very much alike – the same kind of architecture, similar surroundings, same landscape. And as long as everything was going OK and the sun was shining, both villages looked the same. On fine summer's days, both Hallsands and Beesands looked like any other village. The real test came when things started to go wrong, when the storms came and the two villages ended up very differently. It's an example of the importance of good foundations.

We're currently thinking about what kind of Christians we are and over the past few weeks we have seen that, if we call ourselves Christians – originally a nickname used to ridicule the followers of Jesus Christ in first-century Antioch, but now used to denote those who call Jesus Lord and Saviour – our identity is found in the person from whom we take our name. If we are followers of Jesus, then “Christian” is a noun – it's who we are – not an adjective that we tack on to something else which is where we really try to find our identity.

So if we are truly to take the name of Christ and find our identity in him, then we need good foundations, to be rooted and grounded in Jesus and his ways. That is a very important theme in Jesus' teaching as we have it recorded in the Gospels and interpreted in the rest of the New Testament. What is our faith based on? Where is it truly secured? There are plenty of people who use the term “Christian” to describe themselves, who call Jesus “Lord”, but whose lives don't necessarily live up to it – one of the reasons, maybe, who so many people talk about Christians as hypocrites. There is a veneer of religiosity, but it doesn't go very deep when the chips are down. Particularly in times of stress or crisis, when we're under pressure, we need to ensure that our lives are tethered in the right place. So, I suppose the question we need to start off by asking ourselves is: What is your life built on? What do you consider gives you security, both temporal and eternal?

That's why Jesus tells the story we've just heard read to us. It's a very well-known story, the stuff of Sunday School sketches and children's talks, because it is so vivid and graphic. And if you've been somewhere like Beesands and Hallsands – or even if you've built a sandcastle on the beach as the tide comes in – you'll

have a kind of image of what's going on here. Jesus is recorded as telling this story in both Matthew's and Luke's Gospels (we've just heard Luke's version) and in both cases it's at the end of a sermon. In Matthew's account it is at the end of *The Sermon on the Mount* ("Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went **up on a mountainside** and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them" 5:1). And in Luke's at the end of what is known as *The Sermon on the Plain* ("He went down with them **and stood on a level place**" 6:17). The content of the two sermons is very similar – Jesus was clearly one of those preachers who used some of his material more than once. (I've heard Tony Campolo preach several times and three times it's been the same sermon! The absent-minded chaplain at my theological college told us the same stories over and over again.) And both sermons end with this same story, although Luke's version includes the words in v46 with which our reading began this morning – "Why do you call me, "Lord, Lord," and do not do what I say?" It's as if Jesus is sticking the knife in after all he's just said, a way of hammering home his point.

And the point is still very valid for those who call themselves Christians today. We show Jesus respect, but we scorn his view of things. We acknowledge his claim to lordship over our lives, but refuse to submit to it. We sing his praises but overlook his demands. And when the storms come, when the crisis arrives, we have thrown away the resources we need to get through. When the world around looks for help and direction, our own vision is so clouded we cannot give them any lead. When our friends and colleagues look at us and expect to see a reflection (admittedly somewhat pale) of the Lord Jesus Christ, we have nothing to offer but a reflection of the world – and, to use an image Jesus has used just before this story and to which we shall return in a couple of weeks, we offer fruit that is rotten and inappropriate.

So what does Jesus say is the best grounding? What is the foundation we need if we are truly to live up to our calling and to what we are called? Sometimes we misread this story, I think. We say that the right foundation is **Jesus' words**. "*How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in his excellent word*", as the old hymn has it. Well, that's got an element of truth in it. We do need to be familiar with the words of Jesus, with the Word of God. For that, we have the Bible, what we believe to be inspired by God and a powerful way of God's communicating with us. It almost goes without saying that we cannot be a true follower of Jesus if we don't know what he said, just as any teacher would expect his pupils, students, disciples to have some idea of what he's on about. But it's more than that.

Jesus says it's about **coming to him and hearing his words**. The word is there – that's a fact – it is objectively there, in the Bible, in our creeds. We need to hear it, to listen to it, to "*read, mark, learn and inwardly digest*" it, as the old collect has it. And I guess most of us here today do that – even if we only hear a small chunk of it read to us on a Sunday morning as part of our worship. Many will also read it

during the week – in a homegroup or in our own daily devotions. If you're a follower of Jesus, you won't get far without familiarising yourself with what's in here.

But the foundation of which Jesus is speaking here is still more than that. I do a fair bit of reading and I try to read quite widely, even stuff that I know is quite at odds with what I believe. So I've read a few of Dawkins' books, some Christopher Hitchens, books by people who are actually attacking what I believe – but that certainly doesn't make me a follower of them. Plenty of people read what Jesus said in the Gospels (Dawkins and Hitchens amongst many others down through the centuries) and have heard his words, but it makes not a blind bit of difference to them, other than fuelling their entertaining but empty polemic. Jesus says here that the person who is like the man who built his house on the rock, the person with the firm foundations is not the one who has simply heard his words, but the person who "*comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice*". That's the key. That's the fundamental (a word that means "foundation") truth to grasp here. The true Christian, the person who has found their identity in Christ, expresses that by doing what Jesus has taught, by living it out. It's not about head knowledge, not about knowing your way around the New Testament, being able to translate Greek and Hebrew, reading the Bible regularly. It's about **putting it into practice**.

Last week I mentioned a group called *Red Letter Christians* after the practice of some Bible publishers of printing Jesus' words in red and I said that they tried to live "*as if Jesus meant what he said*". They acknowledge that they never really get it right, but they do try to do what Jesus is saying here – they put into practice his words. But it's an interesting question, isn't it – "*What if Jesus really meant all that stuff?*" As we've said, this story comes at the end of both his sermons in Matthew's and Luke's Gospels. So Jesus is saying "*Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord', and not do what I say?*" Why are you going along with all this in your head, but not doing it in your lives? Why are you singing all those hymns and choruses which address me as "Lord", and then living your lives as if you'd never heard of me? He's just said such things as: Love your enemies. Don't come to church if you've still got a grudge against someone – sort it out first. Be generous – to the extent that you give over and above what you're asked. Don't judge other people. Don't entertain lustful thoughts – it's as bad as actually committing adultery. Don't slag off your family and friends – it's as bad as trying to kill them. Don't amass a whole load of material things that you don't need. Don't be anxious. Forgive people who've upset you. And there's plenty more that you can go home and read through if there's nothing there that you fancy. That's just in these two sermons, as well. Have a look through the rest of what Jesus says in the Gospels – and once you've mastered that, start to work your way through the rest of the New Testament.

That's the foundation on which we are to build our lives as Christians, as followers of Jesus, a members of his body, as people who identify with him. It's not easy. We're going to mess up with alarming regularity,

but that doesn't mean we shouldn't make an effort and try. We need to hear his words and **put them into practice**. And that is what will help us to stand out as Jesus people in a culture that has nothing – nothing – to say about integrity and faithfulness any more.

And the ultimate crisis will come for all of us when we face God at the end of our lives on earth. Floods and storms are often used in Jewish stories to represent judgement, and that's what Jesus is really picking up on here. The trouble is, by then it will be too late for us to change. What will your foundations be like when you meet God? Will you be able to say that you have listened to what Jesus has had to say and put it into practice? Are you just a hearer of Jesus' words – or are you a doer? If you sit in here week by week and listen, but it makes no difference to the way you behave out there day by day, then you're being rather foolish and when the crunch comes you'll be exposed for what you are. But if you allow the words of Jesus to affect your behaviour and attitudes all the time, then you'll know that he is the one who can really help when things get tough – and other people will be able to spot that too. It's following Jesus and allowing his love to be your foundation that will get you through the storm. Trying any other way just won't work!

Do you call Christ "Lord"? We'd probably all say that we do. Do you do what he says? Do you obey? That's the challenge from this passage. Are you going to take it up? [And are you prepared to stick with it? (Read *Joan'n 'The Whale* pp100ff).]

For reflection and discussion

- 1) "*How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in his excellent word*". What is right with that line? What is wrong with it?
- 2) Think carefully. Where do you find your security? Why?
- 3) Do we believe Jesus meant what he said? Why/why not? What difference would it make if he did?
- 4) How can we model this as a community of Christians? How can we encourage each other in it?
- 5) Is there one thing that you could do to live more closely to what Jesus asks? Are you prepared to do it?