

June 1, 2008

The Sermon on the Mount begins thus:

*5.1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying...*

Today we begin our reflections on the Sermon by looking at what Jesus says at the very end about all the teaching which has been delivered until then:

*24 "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock..."*

In his parable of houses on the rock and the sand, Jesus draws a distinction between those who act on his word, and those who do not. "Hearing and acting" or "hearing and not acting", then, seem to be the two options open to us. We have yet, of course, to hear in detail what we are to hear and act upon, for we are beginning at the end. But most of us have heard the Sermon on the Mount before. The question is, have we heard it and acted upon it aright; and what should we expect to hear, and intend our actions to be, in response to our gospel readings over the coming months?

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The point of the parable has to do with "doing"; the translation we heard this morning runs like this:

*"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them..."*

In fact it would be more literal to translate this as most English versions do, "hears these words of mine and *does* them". Yet the translation we heard this morning (NRSV) has done us a favour by nuancing the text in such a way as to allow for more than mere action – mere "doing" – in response to Jesus' teaching. Rather, we *are* to "act upon" what Jesus says, and not simply to "do" what he says. It may sound rather a subtle point, but it's very important and we'll come back to that later.

Whatever the precise translation necessary here,

the contrast is between those who "hear and do/act", and those who "hear and do/act *not*". This being the case, the temptation is strong to declare that we have here an insistence that "actions speak louder than words", or that words without actions are empty. But we have also to take into account the few verses which precede the parable. There Jesus speaks of people who will come to him declaring (no doubt truthfully):

*Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?*

To this he promises to respond: *'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'*

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Perhaps a way into unravelling this is to unpack what we imagine the "rock" to be in Jesus' parable. The quick answer from long-time Christians is that the rock is "Jesus". And there's nothing wrong with that answer, nor with the implication that whatever the sand is it is simply "not Jesus". The question then is, what are the houses? Here the answer is less obvious, for the point of the parable is not that there is anything wrong with the houses, but only with the foundations. The house on the rock and the house on the sand might each be as beautifully designed and built as the other. From the outside, and from the inside, there may be nothing to tell the difference between them.

Taking our lead from Jesus' emphasis on "doing",

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we might surmise that the houses are our lives, our actions, our achievements. We then have a problem strange to our moralising hearts: if I have built a life as impressive as my neighbour, how can it be that my life or hers might be found to be on sand rather than on rock? Have I not "done" as well as she has, and she as well as me? Are not the houses of our lives each as handsome as the other? It doesn't help to nitpick here,

comparing our actions in their finer details, weighing up who actually “did” the most and best. This serves our moralising but doesn’t help us with the parable. In fact, the parable suggests that we don’t know the difference between the houses until the floods and the winds come. In the context of the parable, this is the end of the age. Until then there is nothing to distinguish between the houses.

There can be no objection to Christians acting “moral” ways, but the idea of morals and goodness of our actions is not a very useful one when it comes to talking about living as Christian disciples. Jesus’ parable implies that two people could be equally moral, equally good in their actions – casting out demons in Christ’s name, if you like – and yet one be in wholly the wrong place in relation to God.

It is declared often enough by those who consider themselves non-believers that “I don’t have to go to church to be a good person” Yet, God is not interested in our being “good people”, even if this is a characteristic which will arise from a life which is slowly being conformed to the life of Christ. The parable contrasts not the houses themselves, for the house built on rock and the house built on sand could each *appear* as splendid as the other. The contrast is between the foundations upon which they are built. We have to look again, then, at the foundation. We have noted that it is satisfactory to declare that Jesus is the “Rock”, the foundation on which the houses of our lives are to be built. But what does this *mean*? How are two perfectly constructed lives possibly so different in the eyes of God?

I noted earlier that the NRSV slightly over (or under) translates the Greek to give us “whoever hears these words of mine and acts *on* them”. The nuance this introduces is that it allow for a response to the teaching of Jesus which is not simply a “doing” of what he says but an “acting on” or “responding” to Jesus. One important aspect of Matthew’s telling of the story of Jesus is his portrayal of Jesus as a new Moses. It is Matthew who tells the Christmas story of massacre of the Innocents, not least because it reminds the reader of the massacre of the Hebrew boys ordered by Pharaoh in his attempt to kill the prophesied deliverer. Moses, of course, escapes the slaughter, as does Jesus. And, as Moses later ascended Mount Sinai to receive the law from God, so Jesus goes “up the mountain” to lay down a new law, or so it would seem.

But if all we hear in the teaching of Jesus is just a

*different* or “Christian” law in contrast to that the Jews already knew, then we’ve not moved anywhere. We simply have a different set of regulations, and no way to account for what Jesus says about good actions not securing acceptance before God. To act *on* the words of Jesus may indeed mean to do what he says we should do, or not do what he prohibits. But this will not bring us to life. To *act on* Jesus’ teaching is not only to do as he commands but to understand our obedience, and our law-giver, differently. It is to expect something different from our actions – something different than the mere achievement of good and a right relation to the law-giver. To build upon rock is to have a firm footing for *whatever* we manage to build, whether a grand mansion of good works or a shanty-town lean-to. The eyes to see what we have achieved are God’s eyes.

And the good news is that God desires to look at us through Jesus-coloured glasses, as it were – to see not the building but the foundation. Our real work, the true response to the teaching of Jesus, is to do that teaching in such a way that not the building but its foundation is what shows

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forth. This is extraordinarily difficult! Thousands of people have admired these grand buildings in which we gather each week, and yet very few notice the great, if rather plain, blue-stone blocks which keep it in place. And tens of thousands disparage the small gatherings of people within walls such as these, not noticing the true strength of a faith community – its foundation in Christ. Let this latter error not be because we ourselves have forgotten our true worth – not that we have achieved and persevered where others have failed and fallen away, but that we have a firm foundation, a secure base from which we might reach out to pull others from sinking sand.

To act upon Jesus’ teaching is indeed to strive for goodness, but more deeply it is to be building on a goodness which came before us and will last long beyond our passing, a firm foundation which makes good of all that is built upon it.

For the gift of such solid ground and the invitation to build our lives on it, thanks be to God. Amen.