

INSERT TITLE - 26th April 2020

PSALM 127:1

Unless the LORD builds the house,
the builders labour in vain.

How to Build Wisely

Good morning. Our scripture today comes from the mind and heart of Solomon, a man who sought after God's wisdom more than anything else. His desire was to rule over his nation wisely and to have 'a discerning heart to govern [God's] people and to distinguish between right and wrong.' (1 Kings 3).

I suppose the natural question that arises from the first verse of Psalm 127 is: 'how do we make sure we do not labour in vain?'. Labouring in vain is hugely demoralising.

My wife can confirm that I am spectacularly unskilled when it comes to DIY, to the extent that I often struggle pathetically even when following flat-pack instructions. An afternoon spent with an allen key and a box of wooden planks often leaves me sweaty and frustrated, and just a little angry at the person who came up with the original design. I often reach the end, triumphant, before realising that something is on backwards, or that I should have used bolt A rather than bolt F, and I have to start again.

Church-building can feel this way, too. We seek to follow the instructions, which can sometimes seem a little opaque, and we might have a set idea about what something should look like when it is finished. But sometimes in churches, as is often the case in any human endeavour, the component parts often do not quite fit together the way we imagined, and we end up tempted to manipulate and force the pieces to meet seamlessly against their will, and ultimately build a bookcase that just wont last under the weight of a heavy burden.

The answer to this problem is found in Psalm 127 and is remarkably simple: if something is going to last, God needs to build it.

There is a stark illustration of the differing building approaches of God and Humans at the very beginning of the Bible. God builds the world in Genesis 1, taking time over each step, declaring each layer to be 'Good' or 'Very Good' before adding the next – like a painter, allowing his masterpiece to evolve over time. God's intention in the building of the garden was to build a place where he could dwell with us – his design was about relationship, community and harmony with his people, as an expression of his deep love for those he had made in His image. In contrast, the early human builders of the Tower at Babel used their God-given builder's instinct to create something to glorify themselves – the ultimate vanity project which, like Adam and Eve in the garden, sought to challenge the very boundaries of God.

The rest of what we call the Old Testament features a number of similar architectural conflicts. God gives Noah a clear set of instructions so that he can build an Ark that will save humanity and return us to a place where we might exist in good relationship with Him again. But notice how this architectural feat is followed by one much brighter: a

refracted beam of colour perfectly carved out of light itself: a symbol of peace, grace, and of covenant. God uses Moses to release the Israelites from the bondage of forced labour towards vanity construction in Egypt, and then gives them a template of laws carved in stone to help them build a righteous and peaceful community; instead, the people build an idol for themselves from gold, refuse to trust in God's plans, and then spend many years wandering in the wilderness with no clear direction. Even here, God offers a blueprint for a tabernacle and then a temple – a construct designed to help human beings get closer to God again, a shadowy echo of what he intended right at the beginning, and with a promise of much more to come.

Later, the Israelites ask God for a king so that they can build a human empire like their neighbours – a vanity project. Even then, God adapts graciously to their design, building for them a line of Kings that would ultimately lead to the King of Kings: a master craftsman, who would demonstrate, again, the way that God builds Houses that will last.

And so, in Jesus we see God's creative building design manifest again on Earth. Jesus spent his days building a small community of faithful followers from raw materials lost by the wayside: fishermen, prostitutes, tax-collectors – all rough-hewn wooden pieces that couldn't possibly fit together were it not for his Grace and his Power, and his Love. Then Jesus became the 'stone the builders rejected' because his shape and dimensions did not fit their flawed human blueprints. And in his death and resurrection, Christ is the 'cornerstone' of God's renewed design – a new way to build a new kind of humanity – a House that will last, made possible through the sacrifice of the only One who could serve as a solid foundation.

Jesus left his disciples when he ascended to the Father, not with Ikea instructions and allen keys, but with an example of how to build through love, grace and sacrifice, and a commission to continue to collect together roughly-hewn, abandoned, warped and splintered pieces from all over the Earth and, by the power of His Spirit, put them together in a way that brings Him glory, restoring honour to each component part. He often described this new building process in horticultural language, just like His Father's design back at the beginning of the world. He spoke of mustard seeds, and vineyards, and fertile ground, and warned us that if we spent our days building larger and larger storehouses for our wealth, we would have laboured in vain.

We look out now at a world that is labouring under intense social, economic and spiritual strain and we wonder how many of our human constructs will continue to stand once this crisis has passed. Surely, anything that was built by God will stand, and everything else may stagger and fall, or at least find itself suddenly out of shape or backwards.

Our Church has existed for centuries – built by God and intended as a community where roughly-hewn pieces can exist together in peace, and love, and where God is glorified. Our labour will not be in vain if our central pursuit is to construct relationships built on agape Love, and peace – loving the lost and caring for the needy. Each time we speak a word of comfort, or offer forgiveness, or meet someone's economic need, or offer encouragement, or generously bless, or pray for another with faith and compassion, we add another layer to God's masterpiece at St Swithin's, and help to further show the world His glory.

Ephesians 2:19

¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

We should pray: Father God, help us not to labour in vain. Help us to build Your Kingdom here in St Swithin's according to Your design. Amen.