



## Proper 9, Year A – March 6, 2011

Matthew 7.21-29

### A Homily preached by the Venerable M. Ansley Tucker

So, with these words, Jesus ends the Sermon on the Mount, three chapters of wisdom, beginning with the Beatitudes in Chapter 5 (Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, and so on); and much of it framed as a deepening or re-jigging of things his hearers already knew – typically, “You have heard it said x, y, or z, but I tell you, x +1, y +2, or z to the power of 3.”

And we know the audience was lapping it up – for Matthew tells us, they all went home wanting copies of the sermon: “Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their usual teachers.”

But not so fast. It isn’t their admiration Jesus is looking for, a compendium of his homilies on their bedside table, but action.

“Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven...”

And then adds Jesus, the *carpenter*, “Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and winds blew and beat against that house, but it did not fall, because it had been built on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, the floods came, and winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell.”

Same house (by which we mean, the same profession of faith, same membership on a parish list); same storm (which is to say, the same life crises – the death of a spouse, loss of employment, sullyng of reputation, family conflict) – but a completely different outcome. In other words, Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven...

What is Jesus saying?

In the first place, there is no assumption – none – that being a person of faith somehow insulates us from troubles. The purpose of every major world religion is to address the reality of suffering and death. And Christianity, for one, isn’t in the business of suggesting that there’s a way to avoid these, but rather a way to understand and deal with them. The rains fall, the floods come, the winds blow and beat against the faith which we have constructed for ourselves.

So secondly, Jesus’ only question is this: have you built a faith that will stand? Or is it merely a house of ideas, vague convictions about what really matters in life, for example, clothing the hungry or feeding the poor? That prayer is a good thing; forgiveness a lofty ideal; the bible a useful resource; the sacraments of eucharist and confession a way to strengthen the soul; worship an important way to learn to trust in Something, Someone, bigger than ourselves. We can all talk the talk, “Lord, Lord,” but...

Thirdly, you’ll never find out the roof leaks until it rains – and usually *hard*. Our shoddy, lacklustre workmanship can generally withstand most of what Mother

Nature throws at us – but that’s not really the point, is it? What we have built for ourselves needs to carry us through a disaster.

Jesus is saying, Just because it looks and sounds like faithful discipleship doesn’t make it so. Jesus is saying, please don’t expect prayer to support you when your neighbour’s child has cancer, if you don’t actually have a prayer life. Jesus says, Please don’t expect my wisdom and teachings, or the witness of Scripture to come to your rescue if you don’t actually know what’s in your Bible. Please don’t expect your Church to surround you with compassion and acts of mercy in your time of crisis if you’ve made no effort to involve yourself in the lives and concerns of your fellow parishioners. (They will say, as a matter of *fact*, “We do not know you.”) Please don’t expect to be able to forgive “the big one” when you’ve never taken very seriously your own need to be forgiven “the little ones.” Please don’t expect the rituals of the church to enfold and support you when you’ve never allowed them to take root in your soul. Or in short, Just because it looks and sounds like faithful discipleship doesn’t make it so. Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven.

I dare say that these are words of correction for all of us. But they need not be words to discourage. For as it happens, the Church in its wisdom gives us this warning on the eve of Lent – and Lent is set aside precisely that we may together, side by side, hand in hand, recover our commitment to the Christian Way. Lent is the time Christians set aside each year to build a deeper spiritual foundation, to patch up the cracks in our life, to fast, to pray, to give, to confess, and to study.

Jesus says, everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. We can start right now.