



“Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.” — *Matthew 7:24*

**9<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time- A 2008      June 1, 2008**

**Fr. Joe Sobierajski, S.J.**

**Deut. 11:18, 26-28      Rom. 3:21-25, 28      Matt. 7:21-27**

**One of the great contributions that the Romans made to the art and science of architecture and building was the use and development of concrete as the major building material of the empire. Although they did not discover concrete, their techniques surpassed all previous methods of using the material. The Romans discovered that by using *possola*, a volcanic ash, as the binding agent in their concrete rather than the traditional lime or gypsum, they could create a stronger mortar that allowed them to pour concrete into forms and which allowed them to span great distances when formed into arches, vaults, and domes. Concrete was not only strong, it was also cheap. It could be effectively used by relatively unskilled workers to create fireproof buildings as well as foundations under water. Because of concrete practically every major city that came under Roman rule was soon outfitted with a basilica as a law court, a public bath and gymnasium. In many places those buildings still exist in good repair two thousand years later. Most have been able to stand in the face of natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods. In Rome itself what we refer to as “Roman ruins” have become so, not as a result of natural destruction, but because for nearly two thousand years at least up until the seventeenth century, Roman buildings were mined for their columns, arches and stone to make Christian churches as well as the palaces and public buildings.**

**The New Testament often makes use of architectural and building metaphors when speaking of both Christ, the Church, and individual believers. Yet it never mentions concrete since the building material to assure strength and permanence in Christ’s time was “stone”. Unlike the sun baked brick, which was used as the typical building material for homes in the Holy Land at that time, stone was resistant to the ravages of weather. Rain or the heat of the Palestinian sun could do little to weaken it. Even if a house was built of sun baked brick but was firmly set on a foundation of stone, it then had the ability to resist the undermining that might occur from running water in the rainy season. So, it is no surprise that our Gospel from Matthew this morning should see the wise man as one who builds on stone or rock rather than on sand.**

**All of this tells us something about the community for whom Matthew was writing.**

We are told that they were primarily Jewish and we can conclude from his Gospel that they were under attack probably from their Jewish brothers and sisters but also from some Gentile source. As a community under duress, how did they survive and continue to witness to Christ? Obviously faith was the key. The depth of their faith and belief in Christ's love for them was their sustenance.

The very fact, however, that Matthew places this story at the very end of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, indicates that there is something more going on here. The Sermon on the Mount, after all, is meant to be a kind of blueprint of Christ's own life and plan for living. It includes not only being merciful, seeking justice and becoming peacemakers, but loving one's enemies, doing good to those who hate you, forgiving everyone and then being willing to do it all again. This is the rock that goes hand in hand with the faith. The belief and the action are linked together like the stones of a building each giving strength to the other, and each meaningless and weak without the other.

While Jesus compares the wise man to one who builds with stone, the real force of His comparison has to do with the man or woman who does more than pay lip service in their commitment to the Lord. If one simply proclaims that Christ is "Lord" that means nothing if that faith does not somehow influence the way one acts, the way one lives their life. To say "I believe" but to live my life in a way that is unaffected by that belief is to build on sand. To say that "I believe" and then to allow my actions to embody that faith is to build on a strong stone foundation giving my life the ability to become part of that living temple of praise to the Lord. A temple building of living stones which support, and strengthen, and encourage one another.

When John Collier painted our sanctuary painting based on Chapter 21 of John's Gospel, he employed that imagery of stone and rock even though neither is mentioned within the context of Chapter 21. In this confrontation between the risen Christ and the repentant Peter, we have Jesus who gave Simon the name Peter which means rock or stone. As Peter raises his arms seeking Christ's forgiveness and espousing his love, he is firmly set on yet another rock, the Rock of his salvation, Christ. As Christ reaches out to Peter He too is standing upon a rock, a rock different in shape from that of Peter. "V" shaped like a keystone, Christ is the one who holds everything together. What He holds together is us; we are the living stones that the keystone locks into place. As we move to the left of Christ standing on the keystone in our painting we can see the backs of the two kneeling Apostles being morphed into what looks like living stones. The solidity of rock then is the basis of

our faith for Christ Himself having adamant strength. Nothing can destroy Him. And, He gives that quality of His being to all who come to Him in faith. Built on His strong foundation we can withstand anything that the enemy might throw against us as we, like Peter, seek to feed the Lord's sheep.

In our First Reading from Deuteronomy, Moses asks the people to take his words into their heart and their soul. "Love the Lord your God and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul." Moses then tells the people that this is both a "blessing and a curse." It is a blessing if they follow what is in their hearts and souls and endeavor to love God with heart and soul, but it is a curse if they decide to follow other gods. The blessing brings life and the curse brings death. If they follow their hearts and souls they become those living stones of praise, but if they reject God's Word they collapse and are completely ruined like the house built on sand.

Most of us would identify ourselves as "Christians." We believe in Christ and in what He taught, but the real question remains, "Do we act on what we believe?" Consider just some of what Jesus says in that Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard it said... 'you shall not kill'...but I say that everyone who is angry at his brother is liable to judgment." "You have heard it said, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' but I say do not resist one who is evil. But if one strikes you on your right cheek, give him your left one as well." "I say love your enemy, and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be sons and daughters of your Father in heaven." This is just an example of what is beyond the Beatitudes and to which we often pay little heed.

So the question is, "How do we stand as Christians in mirroring the life and teachings of Christ our Savior?" Most of us will not and should not be happy where we stand, but our lives are meant to be the background against which we build our houses of stone, fighting the impulse to build with weaker materials and trying always to cut and build with the stone of understanding and forgiveness that are so contrary to natural inclinations. Each choice we make, however, either weakens or strengthens the foundation of our building.

Think about it this week and act on it. Replace anger with kindness, revenge with forgiveness, or maybe simply a frown with a smile. Christ teaches us to act contrary to what our passions might seem to demand of us. But acting with care, compassion, and forgiveness can go a long way to transform the culture of hate so common in our society.

You have only to watch the construction of the new Wachovia building across from

**us to know that the concrete technology begun by the Romans has traveled leaps and bounds in the intervening centuries. But, the building technology of faith remains much the same as it did in Christ's day. We not only have to believe and believe deeply, but we have to act on our faith. They are the building stones that lock together strengthened by our joint desire to do God's Will, building on the strong foundation of Christ our Rock.**