



'Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.' [Matthew 7:24-27]

As 2021 gets underway, our nations remain gripped by uncertainty and threat. As we consider our response as churches, we believe that a key message for us to embrace is the importance to stay rooted in our faith and to invest in strengthening those roots, that we might be sustained and grow in the days that lie ahead.

The story of the two builders resonates with this as it speaks of the importance of solid foundations, but it is important to think not only about the story itself, but why Jesus told it. He parallels the wisdom and foolishness of the two builders with those who do or do not hear his words and put them into practice. As we consider how we remain rooted in the months ahead, three key messages might emerge for us from this story.

We are called to be a people who listen to the words of Jesus: New technology been a crucial resource in these difficult days – but it also bombards us with information pretty much 24 hours a day. Phrases like “fake news” and reports of interference in elections, make us also aware of the potentially harmful impact of these media. We can't shut ourselves off from that, but we do need to become a people who **know how to listen to the right messages**.

One of our stated priorities as a Baptist community in the UK is to become a **Spirit led people** – this is something to take to heart. Even within our Christian community, we will be bombarded by messages and ideas that we will struggle to keep up with – the Church is not exempt from generating countless narratives as everyone vies for our attention – believing that they are the ones who can lead us through this crisis. But the question we need to be asking is **what is God saying to us?** We need, more than ever, to learn what it means to listen to God. When and where are we hearing the living Christ speaking to us? How do we test and discern this together as a community of God? If we are to remain rooted in the year ahead, we need to develop that ability together to pick out from all the well-intentioned ideas that come our way, what God is saying to his Church.

We are called to be a people who put the words of Jesus into practice: The authority and authenticity of the Word of God is an important aspect of our Baptist identity, but perhaps we also need to be self-aware and ask ourselves if we sometimes consider it more important to believe the right things than to actually put them into practice. There are some wonderful examples in our Christian community of incredible acts of faith and goodness, but we do sometimes get it wrong as local churches, and often at the core is that while we are very clear about what we believe Jesus says, we sometimes forget that we are called to put it into practice.

If we are going to speak of a God of love, we need to be a people of love, if we are to speak of the sacrifice of Jesus, we need to be those who present ourselves as living sacrifices in the service of God – if we are to speak of God as a generous and welcoming God then we need to be a people of generosity and welcome. And that isn't about learning to repeat the words of Jesus or attaching them to ourselves as labels, but by living them out – these things need to be evident by what we do, not what we preach.

We will be a people who face the storms: Our faith doesn't prevent the storms coming our way, it holds us fast in them. So long as the sun was shining, the weather was calm, the winds weren't around, the two houses stood firm - identical and indistinguishable. It was when the storm came that the different foundations were revealed.

Many might well be anticipating a return to something of normality this year. Our instinct might well be to try and rebuild as much as possible of what we had before. But before doing that, perhaps we also need to consider why some things have collapsed – and if so, what was their foundation? This doesn't mean just sweeping aside everything that we had before, but we have been given an opportunity to stop and reflect, to look again at where our foundations lie. So what foundation have we been building on? Tradition? Sentiment? Popularity?

If there is one thing that recent events have taught us it is to take nothing for granted – as we go forward into 2021 let's make sure that we are building on the right foundation and that we are truly rooted in Christ, rooted in the Word of God, that we seriously listen to what God has to say and are serious about putting it into practice.

(This is an abridged version of the sermon from our NWBA online service for the first Sunday of January)