

Cornerstone

Psalm 80:8-15; Matthew 21:33-46

Coming back to the manse this summer there was a decidedly musty air which was soon traced to a corner in the drawing room, behind the television, where unseen the floorboards had slowly been turning black.

A plumber soon discovered that underneath the floorboards an old lead water pipe was leaking. It may have been doing this for ages. Before the repair was made, I looked down under the floor. The manse was built in the 1890s, around the time the Church was built. No-one had seen this space for over 135 years.

As I looked, there were the foundations of my home and there, where the walls met, was the cornerstone. I marvelled that over a century ago someone's hands had cut and carved that cornerstone. Someone's hands had loaded it on to a horse-drawn cart and drove it up Braid Road. Someone's hands had lifted it down, and someone's hands had put it in place, alongside the other stones that created the foundation upon which my home is built. Buried three or four feet under the ground, never to be seen again, until the 24th July, 2026.

In the Church photograph archive there is a photograph from the same era, 1889, including the then Moderator of the General Assembly, the soon to be new Minister of this Church, and the Earl of Hopetoun, Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly, representing Queen Victoria. All present at the laying of the foundation stone of this building. The cornerstone.

For the people of faith the cornerstone is not hewn from a quarry. Our cornerstone is Jesus: the Xing and Master, the Servant and Friend. This Jesus is the One by Whom we set our lives, our morality, our ethics.

If we look to the beating heart of what we believe, it is founded not simply on philosophical ideas, or theoretical theology, or multi-layered history, but on the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He is the bedrock of our faith. He is the heaven of our aspirations. He is the cornerstone, and shows us what it means to be a Christian. When we are called to faith, whether we stride into it boldly, whether we tiptoe around it nervously, it is to Jesus of Nazareth we come. Not just what He said, but what He did. Not just the Christ of the kingdom, but the Man Who healed and taught and washed feet, and listened.

Which is where, I think, we might locate this tricky little parable of the Wicked Tenants. Like many parables, it is an allegory, *"a form of literature in which every word and image stands for something other than what is actually being said at the time... In this story, God is the landowner, the land of Israel is the vineyard, the members of the Jewish religious establishment are the tenant farmers, the prophets of the Old Testament are the representatives of God who came to collect what was their due, Jesus is the son Who finally came to collect and Who was Killed, and the Church is the group invited to work in the vineyard at the end of the parable."*⁴

The parable of the Wicked Tenants is remarkably helpful for guiding reflections on the life of the Church today. In Jesus' time as in ours, it teaches us to expect some in politics, in communities, even sadly in the Church, may try to divert people away from what Jesus teaches and expects. Today the rise of so-called Christian nationalism in the United States and in our own country has misappropriated and misinterpreted the Good News of Jesus. If you believe your faith calls you to persecute people because of their ethnicity or gender; or refuse to help the hungry or homeless; or be deaf to the needs and cries of the most vulnerable in our society and in our world; or to care for yourself more than you care for others, then it is some other god you follow, and some other Christ you worship. It is not Jesus of Nazareth. It is not the cornerstone.

If your faith, not just your head and heart faith, but your hands and feet faith, does not have Jesus as the cornerstone, then there is no lasting substance, no enduring foundation upon which you might build your life.

The stories of the Bible and the history of the Christian Church for millennia show times of sidestepping or rejecting God's ways and God's love. We sigh, and weep and get angry and dispirited about the way our world is. Is it because the world, to a greater or lesser extent, has rejected the cornerstone that is Jesus? I believe a good argument could be made to explain the state of the world because people choose not to live by what forms the basis not just of the Christian faith but of so many other good ways to live. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you is not only a Christian idea. We, however, read in the Old and New Testament, "Love your neighbour as yourself." And that is cornerstone Christianity.

*"There is a sad truth that membership of all Christian denominations is declining as more and more people reject God in favour of 'spirituality'. People do not seem to want Jesus, the Church, the Bible, regular (attendance) at worship, or any form of regular discipleship or service (that requires commitment). They just want some vague connection to some vague 'spirit' that provides some vague benefit to their lives."*ⁱⁱⁱ They may sometimes say they 'need' the Church for a 'proper' wedding, or a funeral, or well-maintained hall space for activities, or for Christmas, or Remembrance Sunday. But if you wouldn't mind, go easy on all that the 'God stuff'. That's asking a bit too much. Is it the case that the world in which we live has not only lost sight of the cornerstone, but they also have, as they did in Jesus' time, rejected it? Rejected Him, and the One Who sent Him?

And whilst we are busy judging 'them', when did we last take an honest look at our own cornerstone Christianity? Is it as foundational to the way we live, the way we think, the way we speak, the way we act?

Now, I am not saying there are not shining examples of times and places and individuals and communities who exemplify this. The light in this present darkness. When I sometimes get down because of the behaviour of others, or the news from the world, I see the things that are done in this, and other Churches. And in the sad times when death claims some of our Church members, and I write their eulogies, I am reminded that though we may tend to despair, yet still there are people in this Church whose cornerstone Christianity, even if they would deny the claim, underpins who we are and what we do. The Walters of our Church, who shape crosses like the one behind me in this pulpit, and the one that hangs in the Braid Hall, because it reminded him of a wife he loved, and whose faith, like his, was unashamed and lived out in practical ways that helped people. The Lyns of our Church, providing refreshments week-in, week-out, at the Heart for Art part of Morningside Hope, serving and including people living with Dementia and their carers. Will others be inspired by real people like these, whose cornerstone Christianity shaped their lives, and shaped our Church, and shaped our community? Are you already, or will you become, the kind of cornerstone Christian that God needs in His Church today?

Some, many even, may turn away from Christ, but Jesus promises to those who hang on, those who persevere, that the Kingdom of God will still be given, and it will survive, and it will bear fruit. We may be fearful of judgment, but will we find that, "*The One Who judges us most finally will be the One Who loves us most fully.*"ⁱⁱⁱ

God has not finished with His Church just yet. When we return to that cornerstone that the world has rejected we will find the imagination and the resilience to keep on building. We will find "that

the world (we) desire comes not by chance but by change.." What a difference a letter can make!

The world God is attempting to shape through the (work) of the Church will not be established by chance or coincidence. It will come only when people change how they live - no longer rejecting the will of God Who made them, but striving together to live in peace."^{iv}

Maybe today, around our communion table, as we share bread and wine, we might remember not only the One Who will judge, but Who will also show mercy and love.

May you then rediscover, or discover for the first time, God's hidden cornerstone, Jesus Christ, still at work not only in the Church, but in your life, today! What does God need building today? With Christ as cornerstone, who knows what we might achieve, as we build and rebuild, not just with stone and wood, but with human lives - a Church, a community, a whole world!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Marvin A MicMickle, *Feasting on the Word, Matthew, Year A Vol 4*, p141

ⁱⁱ *Ibid* p143

ⁱⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, p48

^{iv} MicMickle, *ibid*, p145