

A Bag of Tools

*Isn't it strange that princes and kings
And clowns that caper in sawdust rings
And common folk like you and me
Are the builders of eternity.
To each is given a bag of tools,
A shapeless mass and a book of rules;
And each must make, ere time is flown,
A stumbling-block or a stepping-stone.* A Bag of Tools, by R L Sharpe.

Its an interesting Poem isn't it? I like it, because it raises an important question, are we a steppingstone for God or a stumbling block? Last week, we heard how Simon recognised Jesus as the Messiah, and how Jesus renamed Simon 'Peter' or Petrus, 'the rock'. The Rock on which the church would be built. I wonder how Simon would have felt about that?

'me, the rock?'

My guess is that he probably didn't fully understand what that meant, maybe he never really understood, because how could anyone have seen what the next 2000 years would mean to the church, to Peter, to Jesus?

But today we read how that rock was also a stumbling block. And so we are going to explore that and try to understand why Jesus says this to Peter, but also to consider whether we, with all that we have at our disposal are a stumbling block or a stepping stone to someone else's journey or indeed our own journey of faith.

The poem says that 'we are builders of eternity', that's right, you and me are builders of eternity. I wonder if you've ever thought of yourself like that, a builder of eternity. But if we think about that,

isn't that what God has called each of us to be? He has given us "a bag of tools, a shapeless mass and a book of rules", all wrapped up in the gifts, talents, bible, commandments, Lord's Prayer, and our purpose is to use the 'bag of tools, the shapeless mass...perhaps ourselves and the book of rules...the bible, to build the Kingdom of God. We have a lovely church here, which has been a beacon of light to so many generations, we have a lovely community and a supportive fellowship. We care for each other and when one of our number goes home to be with God for eternity, we feel the loss deeply, even though we give them back to God. I want to take this opportunity, to thank you all for your huge generosity in enabling us to keep this church going for future generations, especially the money raised and along with the grant from the council to repair our decking. We shall be giving thanks properly after the service, but it all demonstrates how well we can work together to build God's kingdom and think of the common good. And yet, the poem reminds us that like Peter, we can get so caught up in the world's values that we lose sight of God and each other and become stumbling blocks rather than stepping-stones.

Simon Peter declares Jesus as the Christ, the son of the living God. Jesus then blesses Peter telling him, "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." Peter gets the keys to heaven thrown in as well as the power to bind up or to set free anything he desires. Simon recognises who Jesus is, he doesn't understand what being the Messiah means, he doesn't understand the Messiah's mission and he doesn't understand the cost of following this Messiah either.

Jesus' mission, was to build God's Kingdom here on earth, to help ordinary men and women know that God loves them unconditionally, that they are forgiven and that through Christ's death and resurrection there is eternal life with God. Ordinary women and men would form a community bound by this love. this is

the church that would be built on Peter. And this is what we celebrate today and dedicate to God, our own church community. And just like Peter, the Community of faith Peter built, would have the same power as Jesus to bind up poverty, oppression, injustice, pain and sorrow, they could offer forgiveness, feed the hungry and set the prisoners of fear, hatred and addiction free through letting love, mercy, compassion and acceptance loose. They would demonstrate all this through their worship, their work and their prayers.

But all this comes in the light of the resurrection, after the cross. Jesus doesn't just come, teach, perform miracles and hand over, he is ridiculed, betrayed, tortured and murdered, because the unconditional love that he came to demonstrate was just, is just. so alien to this world and the world wants to block it out, get rid of it.

You ever given a present just because you love someone and want to give them something? What's the response? Years ago, when Oliver was about 4, we went on a Eurocamp holiday in Italy. I was standing in a shopping queue with him, when he suddenly cuddled me and said 'I love you mummy'. I told him I loved him too, when this very tall German man behind me said 'He loves you? And you've done nothing for it?'

We humans are always looking for the catch, the reason, the why? God loves you, and you've done nothing for it? Yes, precisely! And we, the body of Christ, the church, the community of followers are to show that love, demonstrate that love, even when others ridicule, hurt, blame or oppress us for it. This morning, do you believe God loves you?

God loves us all and through Jesus we have a demonstration of that love, eternal life with him. Jesus tells Peter what he and the church will be given and that the powers of evil will not destroy this church, but what Jesus doesn't say is that the church will not have to face evil or death for that matter. The community of believers will have to face evil, just as Christ did. And we've seen this in our news recently haven't we. We will also have to face death, and sadly we have had to come to terms with that as well.

When Jesus tell his disciples that he will have to suffer and be killed, Peter cant believe it and says no, this must never happen, and Jesus uses this very famous line, 'Get behind me Satan. You are a stumbling block to me' Now I love running, but when I began running I fell over a few times, mostly over stones on the path. Jesus says to Peter "You are an obstacle in my path, because the way you think is not God's way but that of a human being." Peter is seen as an obstacle, to trip Jesus up, cause him to sin, cause him to stumble and not reach the cross.

Peter doesn't want to hear that Jesus, the Messiah will die on the cross, of course he doesn't, would you? And I suspect that none of us want to hear that we will face suffering, heart aches, hard times, ridicule, lies and death. But there are very few people with lives that are perfect and without some kind of heartache and if we deny that and say that once you've accepted Jesus in your life, it will all be perfect, its wrong, because when it happens it is like a stumbling block to our faith. Each time something bad happens and we think 'how can God love me if this has happened or how can there be a God if that has happened?' It turns us away from God and makes us seek solace, help, answers somewhere else, somewhere other than God.

As people of faith, we are given a bag of tools, which include our own faith journeys, our experiences of God's blessings, our prayer

lives. We are given our shapeless mass...our characters, our personalities, our bodies and we are given our bibles. Each of us can use what we have to lead people to God, lead people to trust in Him and accept His love demonstrated through Christ's death and resurrection.

A stepping stone moves a person from one spot to another. It is there in the middle of a difficulty, enabling us over that difficulty, like rushing water or mud, well positioned it can help us to move safely to the other side. Sometimes stepping stones can be awkward, they can be scary to tread on and just like stones we physically step on that can fill us with fear, there are also people in this life who can be just as awesome, but nevertheless, they will help us on our journey of faith.

Let us consider how we are to others, are we stumbling blocks who cause people to fall away from God and sin or not trust him. Do we use false teaching or demonstrate wrong teaching through the way we live.

Or are we a stepping stone that enables others negotiate life's difficult times reaching God in the process? Like Peter we can both, at any given time, but lets always strive to help rather than hinder.

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