

Building a House on Solid Ground

Adapted from a homily given on June 27, 2020

In the early weeks of the season of Pentecost we read the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), and on the third Saturday, today, we read the concluding words of Jesus' extended teaching:

Whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock; and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand; and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall. (Mt 7:24-27)

This sobering image invites us to reflect on the Sermon on the Mount because it reveals the profound practical difference in outcomes for our lives in light of how we respond to our Lord's teaching. Let us, then, look more closely at the imagery our Lord uses in this text, and then briefly at his teachings that provide the solid foundation on which we are exhorted to build our home.

Storms

The first thing to notice about today's text is that *everyone* experiences storms in this life: the wise, the foolish; the rich, the poor; the Jews, the Gentiles; the slaves, the free; the Christians, the pagans. No one escapes them. Storms are the trials and tribulations of this life: illness, a lost job, an angry spouse, an impatient parent, an uncooperative child, the death of a loved one, a haughty priest, a rude store clerk, a traffic jam, a burned dinner, political and cultural unrest, a pandemic. Some storms are minor inconveniences and others are life-shattering tragedies. Strangely, sometimes we react more immaturely to the little annoyance than we do to devastating adversity. Storms, Jesus is telling us, *reveal* something about us, about our character, about who we are, about what we value and what we depend on. The first and simplest lesson of today's reading, then, is that we should attentively notice how we react to the storms in our lives. Don't excuse, explain or evaluate; just notice. Storms become like mirrors for our souls, and if we pause to look into this mirror we will learn something about ourselves, about our inner life. Self-knowledge, divinely revealed in life's storms, provides the raw materials that we offer to God for his healing touch.

Instruction

A second feature of our Lord's teaching is that we all have heard, we all have been instructed. Jesus first and foremost has in mind his instruction in the Sermon on the Mount, which most of us have heard and read many, many times. In this way, when our house collapses in the storm, we are without excuse; we cannot honestly say "I never heard this instruction." But what about those who have never heard Jesus' teachings? St. Paul considers this situation in the early chapters of his letter to the Romans. Everyone, he tells us, is exposed to the revelation of God through the natural world (Rom 1:18ff). Everyone is also given a conscience that bears witness to the law written in their hearts (Rom 2:12ff). And finally, our own attitudes reveal moral instruction to us since whenever we judge another person we condemn ourselves for doing the very same things, thus revealing that we are indeed aware of how we ought to behave, that there is a moral structure to our world which applies not only to others but to ourselves (Rom 2:1ff). So the question is never whether I have been included or excluded from the formative instruction necessary for living a stable and anchored life. God makes the gentle rains to fall and the bright sun to shine upon us all, the righteous and unrighteous alike. This, then, is the second lesson that we would do well to remember: God is always speaking to us, teaching us, calling us, inviting us to follow him.

Response

So we all have been given the divine instruction needed to build our homes so as to withstand the varied storms that we are certain to face throughout our lives. The only question we need to confront, given to us in today's reading, is how we will respond to that revelation. The question is always, have I responded to the revelation given to me? For the one who faithfully responds to the little he has been given will be given more, but the one who ignores life's subtle gifts squanders the precious building blocks essential for the foundation of his home. The only thing that distinguishes the wise from the foolish in today's reading is their response to the instruction they've been given: the wise hear *and do*; the foolish hear *and ignore*. We are often tempted to think we would handle life's storms better if we only had what God had given some other person. If I had been raised in that family, given that education, went to that parish, had teaching from that priest, then I would be equipped to face these horrible trials I'm now encountering; as it is, my excuse is that God didn't give me what I need to face the trials he's allowing in my life. This of course is not correct. God provides exactly what we need, and if we receive it, if we respond to it, then we will have what we need to endure patiently, and even joyfully, our trials. This is the third lesson from our

reading: we simply need to respond to what God has given us--not what we wish he had given us, or what he gave someone else, but the revelation he has given us.

Internal and External Storms

Responding to our Lord's word to us does not mean that our storms will dissipate. Often quite the opposite--they may well increase. But our Lord is showing us that there is a difference between internal and external storms. If we habitually respond to his revelation, our inner life will be calmed. The anger, impatience, anxiety, fear, agitation, envy, disgruntledness, and the like will melt away even though the external storms continue to rage. Indeed, the external storms often increase for those who wisely follow Christ because they not only reveal our character but are simultaneously the divine training ground in which he is continuously shaping and transforming our character. Consider Job, St. Paul, and the two millennia history of confessors and martyrs whose lives all testify to ever-increasing inner tranquility in the face of relentlessly escalating external tribulations. This is the inward journey to the kingdom of God within us. It is not us working harder so much as it is discovering the King already working within us--uniting our desires, our efforts, to his. The inner kingdom consists in allowing God to reign within us, to calm our internal storms, even as the world we inhabit becomes ever more hostile to his compassionate dominion. The stark contrast between the Kingdom's ways and the world's ways is precisely the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, and so we now turn for a selective taste of its guidance which invites us to build our home on the solid rock of Christ.

The Blessed Life (Mt 5:3-12)

We begin with the beatitudes, which we just sang. Imagine what our lives would be like if we could simply follow the first beatitude: Blessed are the poor in spirit, i.e., those with crushed hearts, with contrite and broken hearts; this is the person God does not despise but to whom he gives the Kingdom. And just imagine if we could add to that the second beatitude: Blessed are those who mourn, i.e., those who allow themselves to experience the sorrow of their own lives, of their own sins, and also of the brokenness of this tortured world. These are people who do not let the pain and suffering of this world turn into anger and violence, control and manipulation. Instead they experience a godly sorrow, a divine grieving, for the world we inhabit, for its waywardness, for its tormented and self-inflicted wounds. And so we could continue through each of the beatitudes one by one striving to respond to our Lord's invitation to abandon worldly thinking and enter the Kingdom. This is the blessed life.

The Merciful Life (Mt 5:21-48)

Later in Chapter 5, we hear a sequence of instructions using the formula "You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you ...". In each case our Lord quotes an Old Testament prescription only to inform us that that standard is too low. The prohibition for murder is replaced with the realization that unkind words directed at another condemn us of murder in our hearts. An eye for an eye is replaced with turning the other cheek. Adultery occurs in the heart when we lust after another. We are to do twice as much as what is asked of us, not simply giving our coat but our shirt also, not simply carrying a load one mile but two. The life of following Christ is an immeasurably higher, and more internal, standard than the Mosaic Law. Our life does not consist in obeying rules but in relating to others with sacrificial love. We are to be merciful as our Father in heaven is merciful. This is the merciful life.

The Hidden Life (Mt 6:1-18)

At the beginning of Chapter 6 our Lord instructs us in the pious practices of almsgiving, prayer and fasting. The central theme that unites these ascetic disciplines is that we are to engage in such practices in secret, letting only our heavenly Father see our efforts. If our pious efforts are done to receive the praise of others, we have our reward already--and that reward, that glory, is empty: vainglory. It doesn't sustain us but rather tortures us, always leaving us subject to the manipulative power of what others think of us. In order to be filled with the glory of God, to be his temple, we need to not let our right hand know what our left hand is doing; we need to enter into our closet and shut the door to pray; we need to fast without drawing any attention to our efforts. As we do this, we become freed from the storms of this life that are generated by caring so much about what others think of us--or even what we think they think of us. Our life gradually becomes solely focused on caring about what God thinks of us. This is the hidden life.

The Sermon on the Mount for the Season of Pentecost

With these and other themes--e.g., *The Anxiety-Free Life* (Mt 6:19-34) and *The Judgment-Free Life* (Mt 7:1-14)--in the Sermon on the Mount, Christ weaves a beautiful tapestry, inviting us in the most practical ways possible to follow him, showing us how to live in this tumultuous world so as not to be controlled by it, allowing him to calm the inner storms even while external storms rage around us. These words are his voice, calling us. He is the good shepherd, and his sheep hear his voice and they follow him. If we hear his voice, his words speaking to us in the Sermon on the Mount, and we follow him by *doing* them, then we will be building our

house on solid rock. We will not be exempted from life's storms; indeed, we may even experience more severe storms. But we will be immune to inner storms, to that distracting and debilitating turbulence inside our hearts. Calmed souls in the midst of a worldly tempest. Let us, then, take the Season of Pentecost to reflect on the Sermon on the Mount, to listen for his voice, to respond in loving obedience to the only one who truly is the solid rock on which we can build our home.