

**Sermon preached at Marlborough Road Methodist Church
at the Morning Service on Sunday 7th June 2015
by Rev Michael Langstaff**

Text:

‘The house didn’t fall because its foundations were on rock’ Matt 7:25
‘You are Peter, the rock and on this rock I will build my Church.’ Matt 16: 18

It’s good to be with you today and to be able to share in your 150th anniversary celebrations. Carol and I spent just six years at Marlborough Road when I was appointed your minister; six years out of 150 years is just 4.0%, a tiny proportion of the whole. The readings that I have chosen from Matthew’s gospel for this morning’s service are both about buildings and foundations. Quite appropriate for Carol and for me as we are planning to move and buy a house in Northamptonshire to be nearer our family. As I look at the details of houses for sale my first instinct is to discover where the nearest river is; flooding is something to be avoided at all costs. It’s also good to try and find out what the land is like that the house is built on because the insurers will want to know about settlement and subsidence risks. The house we want is out there somewhere, we’ve just to sell ours and find it!

The Methodist society here in Banbury is 150 years old, this building as it is today was completed in 1975 and I gather that new plans are afoot for future development. The booklet produced to celebrate 150 years speaks eloquently about the people who down through the years have had responsibility for the building; good Property Stewards are worth their weight in gold! But of course you know that the Church is not really about buildings, important though they are. The Church is about people, it’s about you and all the others who have made their mark down through the years. In a very real sense we are the sum of our collective history.

Matthew collects together some of the teachings of Jesus in the passage that we call ‘the sermon on the mount’. Jesus is teaching his followers the values of the Kingdom of God. He lays down a whole series of foundation stones beginning with, ‘How happy are those who know their need of God’. True happiness lies within a right relationship with God; true happiness comes when we work in harmony with our Creator in his ongoing plans for his creation. Jesus goes on to talk about justice, dealing with grievances, relationships, forgiveness, sincerity and self-giving service. He speaks about the futility of anxiety and the need for simple prayer. In my mind, each part of this dramatic teaching is a foundation for life. To underscore the point Jesus concludes his teaching with the parable of the wise and foolish builders. Those who hear and put into practice his teaching are like builders who build on rock. This building has got, I hope, good foundations, but what really counts are the foundations of the people who worship and serve here week by week. I sometimes think that at least once a year we should really study and get to grips with the Sermon on the Mount; it is so fundamental to our faith and our living.

Later in his gospel, Matthew records a conversation with his disciples at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus asks the question, ‘Who do the people say that I am?’ He gets a surprising reply, as it seems that the people see Jesus as a prophet returned for the dead. Then comes the crunch question, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ Peter blurts out, ‘You are Messiah, God’s chosen one!’ Peter is applauded for his insight and Jesus goes on to say, ‘You are Peter, the Rock on which I will build my Church.’ Scholars have long debated whether Jesus ever intended to found a Church. I read just the other day a comment by a nineteenth century theologian who said, ‘Jesus came to usher in the Kingdom of God but all we got was the Church!’

That’s somewhat cynical view, but it is the Church to which we all belong. Fragmented, sometimes divisive and quarrelsome, often stuck in tradition and today seen by many as irrelevant; but we are here and we need to rediscover our roots, our *raison d’être*. Perhaps as this community of Christ’s people enters its 151st year you could do no better than look again at your foundations, are they firm, are they underpinned by the values of the Kingdom of God spelt out by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. As I read the booklet

celebrating this year one thing struck me, time and again over all those years the same question arises, 'Where are we going and what is our mission?' I plead with you, never lose sight of that question: it needs to be addressed in every generation.