

Unless the Lord builds the house

Psalm 127; Mark 12:38-44

Since 1647 the motto of the City of Edinburgh has been a contraction of our Old Testament reading from Psalm 127:

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.”

I wonder what that might mean for a city, or any community or church. Unless God is involved in the building, there's little point. Unless God is looking out for us, looking over us, then there is going to be no lasting safety. I think this means not that we abdicate all responsibility to God, and sit back, and let God get on with it. I think it means that people of faith work alongside God in partnership and co-operation and imagination so that the world in which we live is a place of blessing and generosity, inclusion and welcome, and that, as in so many things, we are better together. With each other, and with God.

Living in a culture that values hard work, achievement, and success; where a person's value is judged by his or her commitment to producing measurable ends, or evidence-based results; here is the reminder that for people of faith, particularly any thinking or feeling the burden of the well-being of their family, work, church or world is resting too heavily on their shoulders, here is the corrective.

Unless the Lord. Unless the Lord.

For the person of faith, we need to remember to leave room to let God into our busy lives. Not just on Sunday mornings, when we have to sit still, listen a bit, sing a bit, and have time away from our mobile phones, computer screens, crammed diaries. But at different times during the week when we are planning and working and doing. If we forget, if we overlook, if we're going too fast to notice that it's become all about us and not about others, and about God, we're heading for breakdown or disaster. The American comedian Woody Allen tells us, “If you want to make God laugh, tell Him about your plans...”

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Now, this next bit of the sermon I'm preaching to myself, but you might want to eavesdrop a little. Does it make a difference if I find a way to squeeze more time out of my day by staying up later to get work done, or rising early in the morning to start the day before the sun is up? It matters the way I conduct myself in my work and that is important. But, Derek Browning, listen to the prophetic word that comes from this psalm: your work is first God's work. You are merely an instrument of God's loving purpose and planning, which started long before you were born, and will continue long after you have gone. Remind yourself of what a wise old minister colleague said right at the beginning of your ministry, "Remember, Derek, there is one Messiah, and it's not you!"

Now, that's the word of God to me today. But I wonder, did it have any echo in your life?

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"The psalmist's choice of words is significant. It is not elite work that is held up as an example of God's work. The psalmist writes common, everyday work as being God's work: building houses and guarding the city gate. God is at work in our workplaces, in our houses, in our communities, even before we arrive. (This) is good news! Our work does not depend solely on us. Our decision to work hard can be a grateful response to the One Who called us to that work in the first place."ⁱ Soloists are lovely, but a whole choir in harmony is a wonderful thing. A flower arranger is lovely, but a team working together is a wonderful thing. A faithful Christian is lovely, but a whole serving congregation is a wonderful thing. Together, not alone. With God, not alone.

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As we live in days when, as the pandemic ebbs and flows and ebbs, and people talk about 'building back better', whatever that means; as people wonder what will actually be *done* by COP26 that isn't, as Greta Thunberg says, isn't just, "Blah, blah, blah", then we may be called to look at what we want to continue building, because building, and protecting, are not new things to us. It will take big efforts and small efforts. It will take massive rethinking and little, joined up changes. It will take the transforming of entire communities, and the individuals within them. We forget, and we need to be reminded. Remember all those wonderful efforts made during the grimmest time of lockdown, where neighbour looked out for neighbour, where connections were

made, where homeless people were found shelter, where the isolated, not all but many, were remembered and helped? Has that continued, or is it fading as people return to the busy-ness and self-absorption of getting on with their lives? This is where the reminder from Psalm 27 rings out clarion-like as a bell.

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We are called back, as children of God, to look at what we do, and how we do it, and maybe also that next step – why we do it. The Old Testament Psalm is paired with the New Testament gospel story of the poor widow. A tiny, almost casual throwaway story of a poor old soul, in the midst of the Jerusalem Temple, part of a crowd of worshippers, making their offering. She gave her little contribution, two small copper coins. All she had, all that she could afford, but gave it in the midst of all the other giving. Thank God for the big givers, the generous donors. Make sure you Gift Aid it! But thank God for the little givers, who give, proportionately, more of what they have, to help build and shape and enhance and develop and beautify the work that God is doing with us.

Unless the Lord. Unless the Lord.

Unless the Lord builds. Unless the Lord watches.

The glory of these readings is how they remind us of God's active presence, sometimes despite us, but often alongside us. The reminder that with God, with our sisters and brothers in the Church, in the community, in the city, in the world, that we are in it together, working together. Building together, watching together. Whatever we are building back better, or picking up from where we left off, this is what we, as individuals and as a Church and community, are about. If you want to see what that looks like, read our intimations. Look at the imaginative and creative building blocks that we continue to assemble and put, on top of the other. Look at the looking out and caring that we as individuals, and as a Church and community, engage in so that people are noticed, heard, and where we can, helped. In amidst the bleak news, the bad news, the depressing news, the despairing news, here is the Good News. Still. With God, with each other. Together.

I'm fond of the story Desmond Tutu tells about a Church in Rome with a statue of a Christ without arms. When you ask why, you are told that it shows how God relies on us, His human partners, to do His work for Him. Without us; God has no eyes; without us, God has no ears; without us, God has no arms. God waits upon us and relies on us. The divine-human partnership is told throughout the Bible.ⁱ We see it in the Psalm, "Unless the Lord." We read it in the Gospel, "...she has put in everything that she had..."

It is in this partnership, God with the people of God, that building and rebuilding, protecting and caring, loving and sharing, remembering and including, finds its place near the very heart of what we believe, what we do, why we do it, and how we do it. It is the living out of a faith that makes a difference. It is the recognition, yet again, that we do not live or work alone. And that matters, that matters so very much, for you, for me, for us all. We build with God, we watch with God.

This is our faith. This is our work.

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

Amen

ⁱ Kate Foster Connors, Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol 4, p274

ⁱⁱ Desmond Tutu, God Has A Dream, p60