

MATTHEW 7:13-29
GATES, TREES AND BUILDING SITES

Pictures tell stories in ways that words can never do! I have no artistic ability but I love taking photos and sometimes photos will tell stories instantly. "A picture paints a thousand words!" Jesus is a master at using pictures to tell stories, evocative pictures that sometimes leave us wondering what He means, other times we know exactly what He means and we're left breathless! There are four pictures today, three in our reading and one spread on the table in front of us in the communion service, pictures that tell us so much about life, faith, the gospel, grace and how we are to live. Let's have a look.

Our reading from Matthew's gospel is the end of the Sermon on the Mount; this is a piece of Bible that is full of memorable teaching, things that the disciples would take away with them, words that would live in their hearts and minds for ages; then Matthew wrote them down. There are three pictures, of gates, trees, building-sites, all of which talk about the genuineness of our faith, genuineness found not in our profession of faith, but in our performance, in the way we live out that faith. It is not great professions of faith per se that Jesus wants to see in His people, but a genuine desire to live out the faith we profess, to be the kind of people in practice that we say we are when we profess our faith in Jesus as Lord. Gates, trees, and building-sites, all challenge us about the genuineness of our faith. Here's how...

There are two gates, leading to two roads. There is a narrow gate that leads to a narrow path and that narrow path leads to life. There is a wide gate and a wide road leading to destruction. "*Enter through...*" (Matthew 7:13) You put two chairs on the chancel and have someone try to get through between the chairs, but first you've loaded them up with bundles and suitcases and all kinds of other things and tell them to go through the gate formed by the chairs. Of course, they can't because the gap is too narrow and they have too many 'things' to carry. The only way through the gate is to leave the bundles behind. The choice to make about being a disciple is to commit our way to Jesus and leave behind all the other ways, materialism, self-centredness, pride, every attitude that is counter to the Christian faith. Making that choice and that commitment is in itself a way of seeing that faith is genuine.

There are trees. "*By their...*" (Matthew 7:20) Only an expert could look at a tree in summer and say "it's an apple tree" or "it's a damson tree"! As soon as the tree has got fruit on it, even I can tell the difference between apple and damson trees. We know trees by their fruit. There are people around the church and in the world who teach things that sound wonderful and attractive, but the effect of their teaching is mightily destructive. The US tele-evangelists, for example, make life sound wonderful, and they go on TV to tell people that and say "send \$50 and your life will be turned around!" They get our money and make themselves rich! What do we say? They sound wonderful! Or, that we abhor their corrupt behaviour? *By their...*" (Matthew 7:20) It is not what we say that ultimately matters, but what we do. It is not just our profession that Jesus wants to see, but our performance as well, the way in which we live our lives. "*Not everyone...*" (Matthew 7:21) What matters? Calling Jesus "Lord" or doing the will of God? Calling Jesus "Lord" or living out Jesus' teaching? For Jesus, it matters more, the kind of people we are: *By their...*" (Matthew 7:20) and in our case that fruit is seen in the kind of people we are, loving, kind, generous, forgiving, patient, people ready to put Christian principles into practice. The Sermon on the Mount is to not to be admired, but is to be obeyed.

Building-sites is perhaps the most famous picture of the three, but not always understood. Two men are building houses and it is all about foundations. A friend of

mine was building his new house and had laid the concrete founds, but the building inspector made him take it all up again, because it was the wrong kind of concrete; the foundation was wrong and the building would not survive. In Jesus' story, one man built his house on the rock and when the storm came it survived; the second man built his house on sand and when the storm came, it collapsed. The point of the story is not the wisdom of building your house on rock; the point of the story is in two different responses to Jesus' teaching: "*everyone who...*" (*Matthew 7:24*) It is the same message all over again: the person who is wise is the person who hears Jesus' words and puts them into practice, who does them, who becomes the kind of person Jesus teaches us to be. Jesus calls the person foolish who hears these words, but does nothing with them.

The genuineness of our faith is seen in:

- The choices we make: the choice to follow Jesus, the choice to come to Church and be part of a church family; the choices we make every day to try to be the people Jesus wants us to be.
- The fruit we bear: "*the fruit...*" (*Galatians 5:22f*) these are personal qualities that Bible commends as good, that we learn to be this kind of person, the person with these qualities in our lives; fruit is also about doing good deeds, helping people in need, loving and caring for the poor in our world; these are the fruit of our faith, the ways in which our faith is seen to be genuine.
- Our response to Jesus: is He someone to admire? Is His teaching something to be admired and applauded? Or is He someone that we trust, someone whom we try our hardest to obey?

The fourth picture is laid on the table in front of us, the bread and wine of communion. It is a picture that speaks to us of Jesus, that reminds us of Jesus, and the words we'll speak later invite us to remember Jesus and especially Him crucified and risen. Jesus is Lord; Jesus is King. We say that we trust Him, that we follow Him, that we serve Him. Communion reminds us that our commitment to Christ is a response to His commitment to us; because He has died and because He is raised, we are inspired to follow Him, we are challenged to be the kind of people He wants us to be. When we share bread and wine today, I suggest we do two things: firstly, that we say thank you to God for Jesus and for His cross and resurrection; secondly, that we commit ourselves afresh to be the kind of people Jesus wants us to be. Gates, trees, building-sites, all make us think about the genuineness of our faith; let's live out our faith, and be the kind of people Jesus wants; practice it, do it, live it.