

A SURE AND ETERNAL FOUNDATION

1 Chronicles 29. 6-19

Ephesians 2. 19-22

John 2. 13-22

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, like many other towns in England, St Peter Port was beginning to expand rapidly. Its population was increasing; and as it did so it climbed up and covered the hills surrounding the Port. A report published on the tenth of May 1860 announced that the population of St Peter Port now totalled 17,000 inhabitants; and this major increase in population required an increase in the number of church buildings to cater for spiritual life.

If you looked elsewhere in St Peter Port, there was Holy Trinity Church, of course, which had been opened originally as an independent chapel in 1789. St James the Less (which has now become a venue for concerts) was built in 1818, followed by St John's in 1836; and each of these churches served particular districts within the original parish of St Peter Port. If you took these three churches together, and then added the Parish Church of St Peter Port (now known as The Town Church), a total of 3,847 seats were available for people who wanted to worship in the capital of Guernsey. But of this total seating capacity, more than seventy per cent was only available for those who could afford to pay rent for the pews; and this meant that only 1,100 seats were available free-of-charge for the poorer members of the island's population.

It should be remembered that St James the Less was 'the Garrison church', and this must have also limited the number of seats that were available in churches in St Peter Port on a Sunday morning. Another problem was that there was no church accommodation for seamen coming onto the docks, particularly at a time when the

new Floating Dock was being constructed. This dock, once constructed, would increase the number of boats arriving from England, with English seamen aboard who might welcome the opportunity to worship in ‘free and unappropriated’ seats. There was clearly a tremendous shortfall in church seating space; and further provisions had to be made.

This difficult situation was complicated by the fact that all of the churches in St Peter Port were in the lower part of the town. This meant that for certain parts of the parish – the areas described as the Rohais, Le Foulon, Les Croûtes, King’s Row and Mount Row – worshipping on a Sunday required one to travel an inconvenient distance to get to a house of God.

Very fortunately, it was then reported that a plot of land in the first field of the De Beauvoir Estate on the Rohais Road had been donated by the heirs of the late William Brock. The plot of land was worth some £200; and it was donated on the condition that the building of a new church commence on, or before the first of June 1862.

It was proposed that a ‘Chapel of Ease’ be built on the donated plot of land, and that it be annexed to the Town Church. After some discussion, it was decided that the new church would contain seats for 700 people, 450 of which would be free and unappropriated. The cost of building the new church was estimated to be £3,200. Thanks to the hard work and backing of a strong Committee, the necessary funds were raised; and work on the site was able to start in time, before the deadline of June 1st.

And then, on a glorious August afternoon in the year 1862, amid great rejoicing, the foundation stone of St Stephen’s Church was laid by Mrs Slade, wife of His Excellency Major-General Slade, Lieutenant Governor of Guernsey (who

incidentally was a contributor to the building fund). Work on the church was completed by the end of 1864; and on Friday the sixth of January 1865, the Feast of the Epiphany, the church was opened for worship. The rest, as they say, is history.

Today, our appointed text from the Epistle to the Ephesians makes reference to another type of church building which is not physical, but spiritual. The church, says St Paul, is a community of people, including both Jews and Gentiles; and he likens that church community to a building. He tells the church community that we are ‘no longer strangers and aliens, but...citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.’

Firstly, the foundation. Nothing is more important to any edifice than a solid, stable foundation. And our Lord’s well-known parable of the two house builders,¹ with which he concluded the Sermon on the Mount, taught the need for rock. On what rock, then, is the church built? Paul replies: ‘it built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone’.

Here, the ‘apostles’ is a reference to that small and special group whom Jesus chose, called and authorised to teach in his name, and who were eyewitnesses of his resurrection. What they taught they expected the church to believe and preserve; and what they commanded they expected the church to obey.

The word ‘prophets’ refers to inspired teachers to whom the word of God came; and who conveyed that word faithfully to others. The phrase ‘apostles and prophets’ may bring together the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles as

¹ Cf. Mt 7. 24-27.

the basis of the church's teaching. But the inverted order of the words (not 'prophets and apostles' but 'apostles and prophets') suggests that probably New Testament prophets were meant. These New Testament prophets were a small group of inspired teachers, associated with the apostles, who together bore witness to Christ.

The cornerstone is also crucial to a building. It is itself part of, and essential to the foundation. It helps to hold the building steady; and it also sets it and keeps it in line. The temple in Jerusalem had massive cornerstones. One of them, which was excavated from the southern wall, measures about 12 metres long. The chief cornerstone of the *new* temple is Christ himself.² Here, Paul has particularly in mind the function of our Lord in holding the growing temple together as a unity: 'in him the whole structure is joined together and grows'. The unity and growth of the church are coupled together, and Jesus is the secret of both. Unless the church is constantly and securely related to Christ, its unity will disintegrate and its growth will either stop or run wild.

And what is the purpose of this new temple which is the church community? In principle, it is the same as the purpose of the old temple in Jerusalem, that is, to be 'a dwelling-place for God'. The new temple, which is the Church, is neither a material building, nor a national shrine, and it does not have a localised site. It is a spiritual building (God's household); it is an international community (embracing both Gentiles and Jews); and it has a worldwide spread (wherever God's people are found). *This* is where God dwells.

Dear friends, as we celebrate the opening of St Stephen's Church 154 years ago, let us renew our resolve to be focussed on Jesus Christ, who is our sure and eternal foundation. In him, and with his help, may we show unity; may we grow; and may we rejoice in the presence of God with us. Amen.

² Elsewhere he is also referred to as the foundation stone. Cf. Is 28. 16; Ps 118. 22; 1 Cor 3. 11; 1 Pet 2. 4-8.