

SERMON – 9 July 2017: Rev Dr Brenda Robson

“Unless the Lord builds the house....”

Psalm 127

Matthew 7:24–29

We live in an anxious world. All around us people are anxious to varying degrees and about various things. We seem to find things to be anxious about at every stage of our lives.

Young teens are anxious about what their friends will think of their new hair style or their latest outfit, about getting essays handed in on time and being prepared for exams, about getting good enough grades for the course or career they want to follow, about finding the means to leave home and live independently.

Young adults worry about whether they will find the dream job, find the dream husband or wife, save enough money for a deposit and a mortgage.

Older adults worry about keeping that dream job or about finding another job after redundancy, worry about coping with debt and paying the mortgage, worry about being good parents (there are so many pressures on young parents), worry about their own parents aging.

And the aging adults worry about their deteriorating bodies and aches and pains, about who will look after them in the future, what happens when the house becomes too much to look after, and of course they worry about their loved ones, their children, grandchildren, their friends.

Jesus said “Who by worrying can add a single hour to his or her life?” (Matthew 6:27).

And yet we worry and we fret and we strive. Much of it, perhaps all of it, is unnecessary. We look back at our teens and wonder at the things that worried us then...and at our later yearsGod has seen us through, we have survived and we go on. God has provided and is providing.

Strain, stress and anxiety cause us to strive and to labour and psalm 127 tells us that without God, all our labours are in vain, pointless, doomed to fail and likely to cause more anxiety in a kind of vicious cycle.

There is no point in getting up early and going to bed late if it is to engage in further anxious toil.

The person who takes pride in working a 16 hour day is sacrificing much, particularly family life, relationships with others, relationship with God. God would not normally require anyone to work and toil for long hours to the detriment of other areas of life, not even if the toil is for his church.

“Unless the Lord builds the house our labours are in vain”

We have the analogy of housebuilding. Often the longest phase of building a house is the preparation, the digging out and laying of foundations. Get the foundations wrong – the wrong site (even a few inches out), the wrong depth, the wrong materials – then the whole house will be flawed and defective. Perhaps the house will even need to be taken down and rebuilt.

Our last house had a flat roofed extension that had been built by a previous owner. I think building was his hobby rather than his profession because the extension had no depth of foundation and we were constantly pointing the cracks that appeared in the walls. It had to be taken down in the end and rebuilt.

Many people live their lives with God shut out. They wonder why they are dissatisfied and restless and bored and frustrated, even when they have all the material things they could desire. They seek to cope through addictions and substance abuse, through behaviours that endanger their health and well-being. Through excessive work and obsessions. When God eventually breaks through – and he can and he often does – that life needs to be stripped down and rebuilt by God the builder, that person needs to be born again with God as the foundation.

It was a messy business demolishing our old extension – dirt and rubble and broken glass and wires and pipes exposed. It can be a messy business stripping out our old lives, dealing with past sin, stopping old behaviours and taking away old supports, perhaps even changing the people we associated with and renewing relationships that were damaged. There needs to be a lot of grace and forgiveness all round. But with God as the foundation, all things are possible. The result is a life saved for the kingdom of Jesus Christ, with great rejoicing in the heavenly realm.

If God is not the builder and foundation of our lives, then all we do will be flawed and incomplete and in vain.

For example, we often hear the words of Psalm 127 spoken at a wedding ceremony – unless the Lord builds the house – that is, the marriage – its builders labour in vain.

We also often hear in the wedding ceremony about the wise and foolish builders from Matthew 7. Jesus said that everyone who listens to him and puts his words into practice will be like the wise man who built his house on the rock. The rains came and the waters rose and the wind blew like a hurricane but the house on the rock stood strong. When the storms came to the house of the man who had built on shifting sand, it fell down with a great crash.

The analogy is then made. The marriage of two people built on the strong foundation of their faith in God and the Lord Jesus Christ will be able to weather the storms of life but the marriage without that foundation will falter and struggle and might fail.

Going to church to be married does not in itself provide the rock for the years ahead, only faith in God is the sure foundation.

And speaking of church, it should be obvious that God should be the foundation of our church life, that God should be the builder and the architect and clerk of works, overseeing and underpinning everything we do. The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ our Lord.

And so the first verse and part of the second verse of psalm 127 focuses on our pointless toil if God is not the builder. Why is there then a short reference to sleep? What is scripture saying here?

Well, it is saying two things because there are two possible translations from the Hebrew. One is the translation in our NIV bibles where it says "God grants sleep to those he loves."

King James Bible – "For he so giveth his beloved sleep"

The Message – "Don't you know he enjoys giving rest to those he loves?"

And so sleep is seen as a gift from God. This has been the main focus of these words in preaching over many years. And good sleep is certainly a good gift from God. We should spend one third of our lives asleep. Psychologists continue to research the mysteries of sleep and still cannot come up with an explanation for why sleep is necessary although they recognise that sleep is essential and that 8 hours sleep each night is the ideal. It is a time for our bodies to relax and recover from the busyness of the day.

Of course, we sometimes do not sleep well. There are many reasons for not sleeping well – where we are (a strange bed), the room temperature, health issues, a noisy environment. It occurs to me that all of these things come into play when trying to sleep in a hospital ward!

But again psychologists tell us that the most common reason for sleeplessness in people who normally sleep well is anxiety – the tossing and turning in the middle of the night, fretting about someone or something.

Good, sound, refreshing sleep is surely a gift from God.

But there is another translation from the Hebrew which I think is more remarkable and exciting and fits in better with the context of this Psalm.

"God gives to his beloved in his sleep."

God never sleeps. He is at work in our lives even when we sleep. He can perform more good for those who trust him while they sleep than they can perform with anxious labour for themselves while awake. What an excellent reason for not going to bed very late and for not getting up very early to get on with things.

Why did God create humans who needed to sleep for a third of their lives? He could have created beings who needed no sleep, were always active and energized, making

the most of life by being on the go all the time. But he chose to make us weak and vulnerable. We are never more vulnerable and childlike than when we are asleep. God said “My power is made perfect in weakness.”

And so this psalm encourages us to give our anxieties to God and to lay our heads on our pillow in peace and trust. God will work on our behalf all through night in his power and love. We often say that things will seem better in the morning. If we sleep on it, we might get a different and more positive perspective on things. God has been at work. He can shift attitudes and change situations, all while we sleep.

In a wonderful way, he can minister to us in our sleep, in our dreams, just as he did throughout scripture in the lives of so many of his children. We might go to bed with anxieties and have a dream that is reassuring and encouraging, a dream in which we go flying into an amazing future with our hand in the hand of Jesus, a dream in which new doors open and old ways are left behind. Perhaps God can get closer to us in our dreams, as we lie still in bed, than he can as we go about our busy days with our toil and stress.

For the Lord provides for those he loves while they are asleep.

Perhaps one of the key words for us this morning is trust. We ask the builder to come and build our extension, trusting in his training and knowledge and experience. We trust him and we let him get on with it.

My oldest son is a landscape gardener. He undertakes big projects, transforming gardens or creating gardens for the first time in new builds. His customers trust his judgement and expertise to give them what will work best for them.

I had a dental check up last week. I didn't need any treatment and I trust the dentist's opinion.

When we fret and are anxious and shut God out from our projects and plans, then we are not trusting in the one who created us in love, the one who watches over us in love, the one who treats us with grace and patience, who only wants the best for us. We could never have a stronger ally or a better friend than Jesus. Romans 8:31 says “If God is for us then who could stand against us!”

Proverbs 3:5&6 also come to mind - “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes.”

Or as The Message puts it – “Trust God from the bottom of your heart; don't try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for God's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; he's the one who will keep you on track. Don't assume that you know it all.”

AMEN