

Rock On

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2 Samuel 22:1-4

Matthew 7:24-29

Today we launch the Strengthening Project to keep this building standing tall into the future.

As we kick off this Strengthening Project, there are four images I want us to consider.

The first image is **the rock**.

Both our Bible readings talk about the rock.

In 2 Samuel we are told David speaks to God – David is praying.
And David is a guy who names God by metaphor;
every visibility reveals an invisibility.

And 'the rock' seems to be David's favourite metaphor for God.

Is it the metaphor you would use of God...?

If you think about it, the rock is not a very exciting metaphor.
It seems low down on the scale of interesting and significant in the order of creation.
In fact, is there anything lower...?

David is a guy whose relationship with God means he probably sees God in pretty much everything around him.
And so perhaps, for David, he can see how the rock reminds him of God.
And perhaps there are features of rock which David identifies in his relationship with God...
...steadfast, dependable, solid.

And surely that is the meaning of the metaphor when we hear Jesus' teaching in the second reading.

The rock is where there is certainty, promise, confidence, ...faith.

Where David uses the rock as the metaphor for God, Jesus is more specific.
Jesus uses the metaphor of the rock for what...?
...His own teaching.

Yes, here Jesus is *teaching about his teaching*!

Preceding this reading Jesus teaches what is called the Sermon on the Mount – it's a vision of what God's Kingdom looks like for us, with us part of it all. Jesus teaches how faith in God has practical implications; a faith that is lived and shared.

Jesus doesn't teach us how to be *religious*.
Jesus teaches us how to be *human*.

Listen again...

"The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house..." (v25)

Tough times come.

And Jesus doesn't promise triumphant immunity from problems...

Jesus promises that a life, built on the vision embodied in his teaching, can stand firm and certain.

When I was in Boys' Brigade I remember the motto 'Sure and Steadfast'.

And we would sing the hymn:

"We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll,
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love."

(the louder this is sung the better)

Tough times come in life, for all of us.

Of course, we are thinking today of all the communities in the United States and the Philippines that are being hammered by the terrible storms.

In life there can be meteorological storms as well as many other sorts of storms.

Jesu promises us that what he teaches is trustworthy and will see us through the tough times – when His teaching comes alive in our own living; when we put it into action.

In 1853 a small group of Christians in the (then) small city of Wellington, who trusted in Jesus' teaching, put that teaching into action.

And just a few years later (full of trust) they built on this bit of rock where you are sitting right now!

The teaching of Jesus was alive in them and in the way they lived their lives.

They built on this rock as a witness to their faith in the heart of this city.

By building on the rock, they enacted their faith thenand into the future.

We heard last week the way the Pressie Church in Myanmar regard land as essential to their identity as people committed to live and share faith in the place where they are.

The same could be said of those who built here.

The rock is a great image for this kind of initial founding action.

The rock is the solid foundation, for our faith, our living, our community.

But, in reality, it's more dynamic than the rock alone represents.

The faith that is based on the rock grows.

Faith is something planted.

As the rock is helpful to express the firmness and dependability of faith in God, planting is helpful to express a more dynamic understanding of faith – that has potential; which God expands, and makes flourish.

So as well as the image of the rock, I want us to consider the image of **the oak**.

You may have heard how many of the old Cathedrals in Europe were built over hundreds of years.

Those who first started the construction had long died by the time the cathedral was complete.

The building of a cathedral was done by one community, in one geographic place, but spread over multiple generations.

In addition to laying the foundations for the cathedral, do you know what those early Christian communities would do?

They planted groves of oak trees.

They planted for the following generations, who would use the wood to construct the **beams and trusses** for the cathedral.

They planted for the future – for those who came after them, whom they never would meet but wanted to provide for, passing on faith in a package that was practical, real and useful – buildings that would help others live the faith.

The oak trees they planted is an image – *a three dimensional and relational metaphor* – of how a community contributes to a common faith and purpose over many generations.

That's a pretty good image right?

There is another image I want us to consider – further to the rock and the oak.
This third image is one that is more proximate –in fact it's indigenous to this part of the world.

The Tōtara tree had many uses by ancient Māori, and one important use was for the construction of waka.

In his book ***Tōtara: A Natural and Cultural History*** (2017) ethnobotanist Philip Simpson recognises how Tōtara trees were prized by Māori.

"Their durability, their usefulness, their role in waka, their appearance - the red bark with redness being a sacred colour, the bark resembling the fabulous moko of a chief, the chiefliness of the tree growing in the forest."

Tōtara trees were dynamic as resources that could be planted, tended and harvested; and dynamic in representing many aspects of community life as the practical reality where useful resources were expressions of responsibility lived in relationship with others.

One particularly significant example is how Māori would identify young tōtara trees that would potentially grow large enough to produce a waka.

As these trees grew they would remove bark from one side. Doing so caused the tree to **grow in a particular way**.

The edges around where the bark was removed would continue to grow, so that the tree curved around toward the scar.

You can see in this picture an example of this process. And the tōtara tree shaped this way is extremely well-suited to make waka – the large canoe essential in many aspects of traditional life.

Did this process take long?

It would take two or three centuries for the tree to be formed into an 'upright waka', which would then be very carefully cut down and the remaining internal wood removed to make the tree fit for purpose.

Like the groves of oak trees in Europe cultivated for Cathedrals, groves of Tōtara were revered for the construction of waka.
Māori even named these Tōtara groves and they were passed down genealogical lines.

Again, this is an image of a three dimensional and relational metaphor – of how a community contributes to the well-being of many generations – passing on this taonga to provide for the lives of others.

The final image for us to consider is the **waka** itself – the canoe made from totara.

Perhaps this is the most dynamic image of what we have considered so far.
The waka offers us the metaphor of a vessel in which we are located together and journey forward.

Sometimes this journey together will be smooth sailing;
sometimes the journey will be rough;
sometimes we will all have to dig deep with our paddles to make necessary progress.

So, we have considered **four images**: the rock, the oak, the Tōtara and the waka.
Which one are you drawn to most?

...God our rock? and Jesus' teaching as our firm foundation when tough times come (when this teaching is put into practice)

...The oak and the totara? as dynamic metaphors for the life that is planted on the rock – growing, nurtured, cultivated, passed on to subsequent generations , to provide for the well-being and flourishing of others?

...The waka? As the metaphor of the journey we are taking together – each making our contribution depending on the conditions.

I hope these images stay with you, as we think about our lives.
What is it that we have inherited from others?
What is it that we cultivate and grow together?
What is it that we will pass on to those after us?

Let me conclude by repeating some of the words of that hymn I quoted:
"Fastened to the Rock which cannot move"

A good metaphor for God, but what we know is that the rock this building is on can move!
And to be 'fastened' to this rock requires more than the foundations we are sitting on right now.

So, by launching the Strengthening Project today, we are doing what needs to be done to ensure that this building continues to serve this community, standing tall as a witness to our faith in the city – now and into the future.

Amen.