

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### The foundation worth building on

Presented by Margaret Hall

#### Introduction

There used to be a program on TV called *Front Up*. Its formula was the old and simple one of an interviewer and a cameraman fronting up to people on the street. In one episode a couple of teenage girls were asked if they had a golden rule to live by. They'd been good friends for years and obviously had much in common; so it was interesting to hear how different their answers were.

One said, "Just live life to the full. You could die tomorrow, so you gotta live your life." The other one had just been sharing how she'd been in the grip of drugs and alcohol, until she'd been introduced to Jesus. She said, "Well, Jesus has changed my life. Because of him life's worth living and I know I'm worth something, so I want to live the way he wants me to."

Two teenage girls, good friends with much in common, but with very different aims in life. They remind me of Jesus' picture of two houses built on different foundations, one built on rock, the other on sand.

#### 1.

What's the point of Jesus' word-picture of two houses built on different foundations? He explained it like this. He said, "Anyone who listens, to me and who does what I say is like the wise person who built his house on rock. It stood firm when the winds blew and the floods rose. He added that anyone who refuses to accept what he taught is like the foolish person who built without a foundation and whose house fell with a great crash when the storm came.

That makes Jesus sound very arrogant, unless he really is who he said he was – sent by God, the Giver of life that will go on forever, the world's Saviour, the eternal Ruler of the universe who's been given all authority and power – claims he backed up by his life and his resurrection from the dead.

The two teenage girls in *Front Up* were good friends and no doubt had much in common, just as the two houses in Jesus' illustration could well have looked quite similar on the outside. The difference was in the foundation - or lack of it. The house built on rock would have taken much more time and trouble to build, and after all that, the foundation that used up so much money wasn't even visible. The house built on sand might have been bigger and better, because its builder had saved on the cost of laying a foundation, and so had more resources to spend on the parts that could be seen.

We can see how Jesus' illustration applies to the kind of foundation we build our lives on. Taking Jesus seriously seems like the foolish option. For example, a businessman who has no qualms about doing shady deals, will probably get the best business opportunities. A wife or husband who, for Christ's sake, puts faithfulness to their spouse before pleasing themselves might seem un-liberated. To forego the highest

salary you can earn, just because Jesus warned of the dangers of getting rich seems particularly foolish. People who, because they're Christians, say no to sex before marriage are considered totally unreal, as out-of-date as dinosaurs. And as for turning the other cheek, and trying to love your enemies, who wants to risk being a doormat?

The point of Jesus; word-picture is that lives built on the shifting sands of what suits us or what other people think tend to fall apart when the storm hits – storms like illness or accident or the death of someone we love. Then there are the smaller storms of everyday life, all of which take their toll: the daily crises, the misunderstandings, the failures that leave us feeling down. Sometimes the storm is a very strong, potentially destructive temptation, which by ourselves we don't have the strength to resist.

Such testings come to all of us - to those who live as if Jesus never existed, but also to those who think he's worth believing. That's because faith in him isn't an insurance policy we take out to protect us from the consequences of all that can go wrong in the world.

## 2.

Some years ago a friend of mine was hit by a particular storm that came out of the blue. She was diagnosed with a rare disease which required an immediate and very serious operation on her spine – a tricky procedure with many unknowns. I went to see her in hospital and received more encouragement than I gave, from her unshakeable confidence that God was in control. That wasn't really surprising – many years before, she'd put her faith in Jesus and her life was about pleasing him. That was the foundation that kept her steady in the midst of the storm. She knew that, whatever the outcome, she belonged to him. He was with her and she was with him – forever – because that's what he promised.

The storms that batter our lives can test our foundations in various ways. Towards the end of 1975, the Anglican archbishop of Uganda, Janani Luwum, visited Australia. A journalist asked him if he feared for his life under Idi Amin's oppressive regime. He replied that he woke up every day conscious that it could be his last. A few months later at a public meeting in the centre of Kampala, to which all the bishops had been summoned, he was arrested by Amin's soldiers. Dressed in his episcopal robes he was marched to a waiting car and driven off. That was the last time he was seen alive.

A few weeks before he had written to President Amin, appealing to him to stop the torture and killing of innocent people. He knew the price he would have to pay. But he also knew that in order to obey his real Master, the Lord Jesus, he had to speak up for the oppressed, and his conscience would not allow him to remain silent. He stood firm through the test of his faith and obedience, and so entered into his real life. It was rumoured that Idi Amin himself had shot him. However that was, the archbishop's murder was the beginning of the end of that reign of terror in Uganda. Amin himself has since gone to meet his Maker, but the church he persecuted is stronger than ever.

For the archbishop's friend, Bishop Festo Kivengere, a different kind of storm hit a few weeks later. Hearing he was at the top of Amin's hit-list, friends persuaded him to leave the country. He and his wife were driven into the mountains in the south-west of Uganda and they crossed the border into Rwanda on foot in the middle of the night. They were safe from *physical* harm, but in the weeks that followed Festo's mind was in turmoil as he struggled with how he felt towards the man who'd caused the death of so many thousands.

On Good Friday morning, sitting in the back of All Souls' Church in London, and feeling, as he put it, spiritually strangled, he listened to the meditation on Christ's words from the cross. And he knew he had to forgive Idi Amin as freely as he himself had been forgiven. So he knelt to pray for his persecutor, just as Jesus had commanded. He went on to write a little book to which he gave the title *I Love Idi Amin*.

Janani and Festo faced different kinds of storms, but both of them withstood them by doing what Jesus said.

### 3.

For close to fifty years from the late 1950s Alice Chambers was a speaker at women's conventions all over Australia and beyond. She inspired many with her writings. When she was only fifty, her much-loved husband died suddenly while they were on holiday in England. She wrote in her book *Something More*, that in the weeks following his death she couldn't sleep, couldn't pray, and didn't feel like reading the Bible. She was just extremely sorry for herself and, wondering what was going to happen to her. But one morning as she watched the sunrise she felt God was speaking to her through the words he'd spoken long ago to Job: "Have you ever given orders to the morning or shown the dawn its place?"

She replied, "No, Lord, but you have." And she was at peace for the first time in many weeks, as she felt the presence of the One whose mercies are new every morning, as sure as the sunrise. In the midst of the storm of sudden bereavement she was steadied and strengthened because the foundation of her life had been well laid on the rock of God's word.

The storms that roll over you and me may not be as big as persecution at the hands of an Idi Amin or the sudden death of someone close to us. But still they seem big enough, and Jesus' words still hold true, that the life built on believing him and obeying him will not come crashing down when the winds and floods beat against it.

You might feel your life doesn't have a foundation, or not one you know you can rely on when the tide's against you. But whoever you are – whatever your life has been to this point – Jesus' invitation to trust him still stands. He invites everyone: who's weary and burdened to come to him and find the rest, the reassurance and peace, which our souls crave and which he alone can provide. His invitation comes with all the authority of his perfect life. It comes with all the authority of that one perfect person dying in the place of all the imperfect people so he could bring us back to God. And it comes with all the authority of his emergence, very much alive, from, the tomb where his body had been laid.

What does it mean to come to Christ and find rest? It means we rest from our own feeble and futile attempts to impress God that we're good enough. It means we enjoy the relief of getting wiped off the record everything we've done that we're ashamed of. It means resting in the security of knowing we're accepted by God – that, Jesus said, "no one can snatch us out of his hands."

We rest from the bondage of useless regret about the past. We rest in the knowledge that we're not alone, because he promised us the Holy Spirit, to be with us wherever we are. We find relief as we pray, handing over all our concerns to the One in charge. We enjoy a sense of community with others who've put their trust in him, and a sense of purpose as we're caught up in what he's doing in the world - quietly reshaping each one who turns to him into what we're meant to be.

## **Conclusion**

A hymn written a few years ago expresses very well what it means to build our lives on the rock of what Jesus did and said.

In Christ alone my hope is found,  
He is my light, my strength, my song;  
This cornerstone, this solid ground,  
Firm in the fiercest drought and storm.  
What heights of love, what depths of peace,  
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!  
My Comforter, my all-in-all,  
Here in the love of Christ I stand.

In Christ alone, who took on flesh,  
Fullness of God in helpless babe,  
This gift of love and righteousness,  
Scorned by the ones he came to save.  
Till on that cross, as Jesus died,  
The wrath of God was satisfied,  
For every sin on him was laid.  
Here in the death of Christ I stand.

It echoes a much-loved, older hymn:

On Christ the solid rock I stand –  
All other ground is sinking sand!