The Holy Gospel According to Matthew 7: 24-29
“Everyone, then, who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.  The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on rock.  And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand.  The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!” Now when Jesus had finished saying these words, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as their scribes.

Jesus began His public ministry when he was about 30 years old, and, according to the Book of Matthew, one of the first things he did was “The Sermon on the Mount.” We know from the gospels that Jesus began his ministry in a town called Capernaum - a fishing village on the northern end of the Sea of Galilee.  It was the hometown of Peter and Andrew, and just behind Capernaum is the mountain where people believe he preached this first sermon. The sermon included Jesus teaching his followers the Lord's Prayer and several parables. These included the Beatitudes and Jesus' teachings about God's laws. Consequently, today it is known as the Mount of Beatitudes. It isn’t a high mountain by our standards, and Ed Hillary would make short work of it.  In reality, it’s actually more like a hill, but it does give a spectacular view of the Sea of Galilee.

It is interesting that Matthew maintains Jesus preached the sermon on the mountain, but in Luke’s gospel he says that Jesus preached when he came down from the mountain and is referred to as the Sermon on the Plain. The other two gospel writers, Mark and John, do not mention these sermons at all.

There are many similarities and differences between the sermons on the mount and the plain. Well, one question that pops up with theologians is that perhaps they are talking about the same sermon, but their memories were simply muddled in terms of the actual real estate.

Others speculate that it is more likely that they are two separate sermons that included similar teaching material. That is certainly more likely because given the itinerate nature of his ministry, Jesus taught similar material at different times. So, it is quite possible, that the sermon on the plain is a similar sermon to the one on the mount but edited differently for his respective audiences. However, what is certain is that in both sermons he defined the essentials of what we now call a Christian lifestyle for his disciples.

The Sermon on the Mount is the longest recorded sermon by Jesus and included “do to others as you would have them do to you”; a teaching popularly known as the *Golden Rule.* Then there was “do good to those who hate you”. A parallel statement “Love your enemies” preceded this one and may be quoted more often. This special law of Christianity, is possibly the highest test of piety for us all, and probably the most difficult of all Christian duties to perform.

Today’s reading has Jesus closing the Sermon on the Mount with the story of two people and the houses they chose to build. The analogy of using these two building styles to describe life as a Christian is particularly powerful. It suggests two people, with two separate responses to Jesus’ message. The first person is like a house that has been built on a rock. Its foundation is strong and secure and can withstand any assault. The second is like a house built on the sand. Its foundation is weak and unstable and may eventually be destroyed by a storm. This final story summarizes the sermon with a clear message: becoming a follower of Jesus is to become a member of his society, with a willingness to live one’s life according to the values and beliefs of that society. Jesus’ invitation to an encounter with God is a different way of life. This life will provide not only strength in the present to withstand the various storms that come our way but also the final great storm that sees us through to an eternity with the Lord, to and for whom we have lived a life of devotion.

All those years ago, in this grand finale of the Sermon on the Mount, people on the mount were astounded at his teaching and saw his teachings as a benchmark for their own beliefs and practices. His words were not memorised rhetoric from the temple as from the Pharisees, he instead was energised by a creative, life-giving spirit that offered love and service. Like King Charles, he was not there to be served, he was there to serve. Similarly, we today should be moved by the words of persons of real integrity, rather than by beautiful, memorised rhetoric that is not backed by deeds.

Jesus' wisdom was a rock of truth from which we can make decisions and commitments in life and place ourselves on that solid footing which will give us both insight and compassion in all we do in our lives.

Just as buildings need solid foundations and a sandy base is unreliable, this message applies guidance to our faith. The purpose of the sermon on the mount was to avoid the temptation to resort to shallow, one-dimensional thinking that would not withstand scrutiny or pressure. The word of God is the rock we are to build on. The deeper and more solid the foundation is, the more the house is secure.

The text challenges us. It is a call to be wise. A call for us to embrace wisdom – wisdom for the day, wisdom for the journey, wisdom for life. It is a wisdom that inspires in us both character and actions. It calls us to live with full focus on the world around us. It wants the best of who we are, energetic and prepared to meet the challenges of every day. If we are to step forward and take charge of our future, we need to always remember the Christian principles of kindness, gentleness, humility and patience, but, we also need to practice the qualities of justice and righteousness. These are the very ingredients that give us a solid rock-like future, a personal house of faith with strong foundations.

This is the powerful message, intended to be the foundation of our Christian lives, where we can withstand the fiercest of problems and storms. Jesus is in fact, the rock that supports our faith and actions, so that we fear neither wind nor flood.

Amen