Westlake Church Lausanne

The Building God Does Care About: Gather
Matthew 16:13-18

As many of you know, as a church we've begun a process to see whether we can raise the money to obtain our own building. And we've called that project *Building to Gather, Grow and Go*. And over the coming weeks we want to share with you more of the details on that, with our intention being to start the fund raising campaign proper by the end of this September, and ending at the end of January next year, 2018. But as I say, we're going to be giving you more details on that in the weeks to come, on all the various options and challenges before us.

The problem with a project like this, is that it can take all our focus, and we become about the building, and the money and fund raising and totals, and land and bricks and walls, and we lose track of what we're really supposed to be about as a church. So as we enter what's probably going to be an exciting and challenging phase for us as a church, we're going to take three Sundays to remind ourselves of God's vision for his church - of what it is God would have us do with a building, if we get one.

Because it's way more than bricks and mortar. You see, ultimately, God is far less interested in *where* we meet than in *why* we meet. He's far less interested in concrete and paint and chairs, than in lives transformed by Jesus, for the glory of Jesus. So, we're calling this mini-series, The Building God *Does* Care About. And we're going to look at each of *Gather*, *Grow*, and *Go* – beginning this week with *Gather* and ending with *Go* on our mission Sunday in two Sundays time.

Matthew 16:13-18

We're going to look at the who, the what, the how, and the why of church building.

The One Who Promises to Build
Verse 18, where Jesus says, "I will build my church". *I will* build. Now, when you say, I will, what does it mean? Hopefully, it means a lot! I had a friend at school, whose personal motto was *dictum meum pactum*. My word is my bond. When I say I'm going to do something, you can count on it. In fact, *dictum meum pactum* is the motto of the London Stock Exchange – that when brokers were doing deals, they could trust one another – we're people of integrity. When I say, 'I will' it means, 'I will'!

But sometimes, we're not quite as good as our word, are we? About 12 years ago the girls saw these wonderful toy wooden crossbows for sale in a country house in the UK, which they really wanted, but I didn't want to pay for. So I said, 'look girls, Dad could make you one of those'. 'Really?' 'Sure I will'. And 12 years later, they still remind me that I have failed to keep my word!

Or in the marriage vows, the minister will ask the groom and then the bride: will you love her, comfort her, honour and protect her, and, forsaking all others, be

faithful to her as long as you both shall live? And they reply, 'I will'. And yet, there are days when I've not loved and cherished and honoured Su as I should. As I promised to do. That my 'I will' has not been as certain as it should be.

But when Jesus says, 'I will' – it's very different. Things happen when he says it. The gospels tell us how a leper came to Jesus and cried out, 'Lord, if you are will, you can make me clean.' And Jesus' response? 'I will, be clean'. And the gospels tell us the man was healed from that moment. Why? Because Jesus always follows through on his 'I will', and things always happen.

You see, just think who it is who is saying, 'I will build' here. Over the last seven weeks we've been looking at the seven letters of Jesus to the churches in Revelation. And Jesus dictated those letters standing among the lampstands, representing the seven churches. So he's the one who identifies with his church. But in his hand he also held seven stars also representing those seven churches. And John, who saw that vision, and wrote down Jesus' words, described him as being one like a son of man – one like the heavenly figure who the prophet Daniel saw in a vision approach the throne of God and to whom all authority and power and dominion were given.

And that's who Jesus is. That's who says here, I will build. The one with all authority in heaven and on earth, the one who holds history, and local authorities, and the church, and your life, in his hands.

What He Promises to Build

Verse 18 again, 'I will build my *church*.' But what does he mean by *church*? Does he mean a physical building, so everyone can sit in comfort, or a nice steeple, with a bell tower? No. Our word *church* translates the Greek word *ekklesia*. And that word was used to translate the Hebrew word for the assembly, or the community, or the gathering, or the congregation of God's people in the Old Testament. So whenever God's people gathered in the Old Testament – that was the church. In fact, in Greek at the time of the New Testament, *ekklesia* could be used of any large gathering of people – a crowd rioting could be called an *ekklesia* – because it was people coming together.

So when Jesus promises to build his church, he is promising here that he will build a community. But not any old community – *my* community. I will build *my* church: The gathering of God's people, whom Jesus has gathered to himself as a new community.

And there's nothing else that comes with that promise that Jesus will build it. There's no such promise for Christians schools or universities or businesses or para-church organisations, or our careers, or our names. It's this gathering together of God's people in Jesus – that's what I'm going to build, he says. So

what does that tell you? It tells you that when you give your life, your time, your money, your resources, your energy, your skills, your gifts, for the building up of God's church, his people, you're not wasting them. In fact, it's not going too far to say that if we're not investing our lives in what Jesus is investing in, that's when we're in real danger of wasting our lives.

How He Promises to Build

And Jesus tells us two ways he's going to build his church here. Look at how this whole discussion begins. He asks the disciples who other people say that the Son of Man is. And the disciples reply, 'well, some say John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah or one of the prophets'. But then Jesus follows it up with a supplementary question. Verse 15, "But who do you say that I am?" And that is one of, if not the most important questions you can ever be asked. Because others can answer that question anyway they like – but what about you – who do you say I am? Who do you say Jesus is? And your happiness, and joy, and security, and identity, and sense of self-worth all hang on how you answer that question of who you say Jesus is.

And Simon Peter responds for everyone else there: Verse 16, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And so Peter has told Jesus who he is, and now Jesus tells Peter who he is. Verse 18, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

Now, I've no idea of he's right or not, but one commentator says that more has been written on that one verse of Scripture than any other. But even if that's not true, what is true is that it has generated a huge amount of disagreement between Catholics, who have argued that Jesus here assigns an apostolic supremacy to Peter, and thus to his later position as bishop of Rome, and to all those Popes who followed after him, and Protestants who have argued that it's not Peter at all that Jesus is referring to but his confession of who Jesus is, or even of Jesus' own teaching.

So what does Jesus mean when he calls Simon, *Peter*, petros, rock, and on this rock, this petra, I will build my church? Well I'll tell you what I think. It's pretty clear to me that Jesus does mean Peter – that's the whole point of the word play on *petros* and *petra* – which if Jesus was speaking in Aramaic, which he probably was, would have been even clearer because both would have been Kepha. And in the early church Peter was a rock. He preached the first evangelistic sermon at Pentecost where thousands were converted, and brought in to the gathering, the congregation, the *ekklesia* of the people of God. And he took the gospel to the gentiles with the conversion of Cornelius. But it's also clear that there is nothing here to suggest anything of some later papal supremacy. Here Peter is acting as the spokesman for all the apostles. Jesus has just asked them, who do you – plural – say that I am? And Peter responds for them all. And it's his response of who Jesus is that elicits this response from Jesus.

So the rock on which Jesus will build his church is this apostolic confession, articulated by Peter, of who Jesus is: that he is the Christ, that he is the Messiah, the anointed one, the King, the One who will free the people of God from her enemies, the Son of the living God. And that's the one foundation, this apostolic faith, this apostolic proclamation of who Jesus is, that Jesus promises he will build his church on.

But you can *grow* a church in many different ways other than that, can't you? You can draw a crowd by having a great personality, or by having wonderful music, or a great kids' program, or by being an effective speaker and giving little pep talks that make you feel good about yourself. And you can get a crowd that way. But the only church that Jesus will build is one centred on this apostolic confession – that he's the one at the centre. That he's the one who's come to rescue us. That he's the one we've all been looking for. That when we run after this or that thinking that this will give us happiness, or that will make us feel complete, or this will give me the freedom or the security I long for – we've been looking in the wrong place. That it's Jesus who is the Messiah.

And the job of the church is not to promote or make much of itself, or it's leaders, but to make much of Jesus. It's why when you get to Revelation, and you see the great crowd, the gathering, the church – and guess what, it's not us who are the centre of attention there – it's God, and Jesus, the lamb upon the throne.

So that's the foundation Jesus promises to build on. But then he tells us one more way he's going to build his church – it's by plundering hell.

Look at what he says, v18, "I will build my church, *and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*." So the church that Jesus builds – any church that holds to and proclaims the apostolic faith of who Jesus is and all the implications that flow from that, is going to find itself in a battle. It's going to find itself under spiritual attack. So it should never surprise us if not everyone likes us. But Jesus promises that the powers of darkness and death, the gates of hell, will not destroy his church – that what he promises to build will stand.

But Jesus means more than that. You see, think about it. Gates tend not to be used as offensive weapons, do they – they tend to be defensive. If you live in a gated community – it's because you want to keep people out, you want to stay safe behind your gates. Castles were built with gates of thick wood, that could be barred – to keep the enemy out. And Jesus is saying that the gates of hell will not prevail, they will not stand against the church. Why?

Because Jesus always builds his church by rescuing people from the powers of hell and darkness. By tearing open the gates of hell and plundering those held captive by darkness. He builds his church by his Spirit giving sight to blind eyes,

and hearing to deaf ears, and opening up people's shut up hearts, so that they can hear and respond to the gospel, and be led out from captivity and into the glorious freedom of God's people. That's how Jesus builds his church. And throughout the New Testament, that's what you see happening – the wealthy and the influential, the poor and the unknown, those friendly and those implacably opposed and breathing out murderous threats against the church – Jesus rescues them all – and he does so, through the power of his Spirit, in the proclamation of this apostolic faith called the gospel. Because it's only the good news of Jesus in the power of the Spirit, that has the power to do it.

But why does Jesus promise to build his church?

Why He Promises to Build

Why promise to build people like us, rescued from darkness, into a gathering, a congregation of God's people? Why not just rescue them and build them up as individual Christians? Why the need to gather, to come together?

And that question's especially pertinent in our day, isn't it? I mean, we live in a highly individualistic age, don't we? We live in the selfie-age. And I'm ok on my own, and faith is a personal thing, and I don't need others.

Why? Because we *do* need others. You need your brothers and sisters in the church, and they need you. We need one another because we have a selective blindness. We can see other people's faults really easily, but we're not so quick to see our own shortcomings and rough edges, and so we need friends who love us and care for us and want the best for us, to keep us accountable.

And the gathering of God's people is the community where that kind of life change happens. I mean, think about social media relationships - they can never give you that. Facebook friends, Twitter followers, Instagram, Snap chat – they make much of being communities or families, but in reality they are just echo chambers - where you hear what you want to hear, from people who agree with you. But if we are to grow and change, we need a much better community than that. And in a church, which keeps the life-changing good news of Jesus centre stage, you'll find it.

Then, we need one another to encourage one another. When you're swimming against the tide of culture, sometimes it helps to have someone swimming alongside you spurring you on. You know when you see geese flying in those amazing v formations – they do it because they are far more efficient flying together than apart. And they take it in turns to be the one at the front, who does more of the work. But when they're not at the front, what do the ones at the back do, as well as just fly? They honk! They honk their support to their friends doing the work at the front – come on! you can do it! keep it going! you're great! We

love you! That's what honk means! It's why Paul writes in 1 Thess 5:11, 'Therefore encourage one another and build one another up.'

Plus we need one another because God in his wisdom has distributed gifts and skills and callings across his people, so that if we are to complete the work he has given us to do, of proclaiming his gospel – we need one another to do it.

And that's why in the New Testament you see Christians coming together – in the temple, in the synagogues, in people's houses, in large assembly halls. And as Acts 2 tells us 'they' – plural – together – as a community – 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.' In other words, they gathered to worship, in all its forms – because they needed to and we need to regularly remind ourselves, and reorient ourselves, and recalibrate ourselves that life is not about us, it's about him.

So, it should come as no surprise that when the writer to the Hebrews writes of how you and I can draw near to God, as individuals, the inevitable outcome is that we will draw near to one another to do just that: Hebrews 10:19-25: 'Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.'

Now, there are reasons why you might be tempted to neglect meeting together, aren't there? In community you can't always have things your way, and we like having things our way. And in very imperfect local churches like ours, the preaching's imperfect, the music's imperfect, the people and pastors are imperfect. And people can be difficult. And real relationships can be difficult. But Hebrews says – still, don't neglect it. Because if you turn around what the writer says in Hebrews – it stands to reason that when you begin to neglect consistent, committed, real, Christ-centred Christian community, your heart is probably cooling on Jesus as well. So, don't give up this gathering together, he says, to stir one another up to love and good works, and to encourage one another. Teach it and model it to your kids. Make it a priority. Because it's this congregation, this community of God's people, it's the church, that Jesus promises to build.