

Lent Compline Talks 2017

## Faith in and at Work

St Mary's Kidlington

Holy Week Wednesday, 12th April

Prof John Morris

### Carpenters

For this final compline of holy week, looking at occupations and faith in the bible, I want us to think about Jesus' own occupation for the majority of his adult life, that of a carpenter, the trade in which he would have been deeply involved as part of his earthly father's business. Throughout history, and particularly in earlier times, wood was the principal building material and wooden objects and carpenters common place. For that reason they are rarely mentioned, and certainly not by name.

Many carpenters must have been employed in the building of Noah's ark, made with ribs of cypress, covered with reeds and coated with pitch to waterproof it. Genesis suggests it was a huge vessel by comparison with known boats of the time. To house all those animals it was said to be 300 cubits in length (the cubit varied a little from country to country, but was between 18 and 20 inches – the distance from the point of the elbow to the tip of the middle finger) in other words about 100 yards in length – huge. Be that as it may, the carpenter's skill here was – if we take the story of Noah at face value – responsible for physically saving all human and animal life. Fitting then, that it should be a carpenter from Nazareth who we regard as our saviour and our guide to eternal life.

Exodus tells us that the Ark of the Covenant was a chest fashioned of acacia wood, and the related tabernacle and accompanying altar were also partly built of acacia wood, though much of the wood was covered with gold, all of which would have required some skilful carpentry as well as metal working. It is likely, however, that the altars built by Noah to give thanks after the flood, or by Abraham to give thanks on being told that the land of the Philistines would be given to his descendants, were just piles of stones, because the altar was a support for burning sacrifices. When Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac he laid his son on a bundle of wood placed on the altar; the first altar built by Saul is stated to be a 'great stone'; and the altar built by Elijah when he defeated the prophets of Baal was made of stones on which the wood was laid for the burnt offerings.

Altars in Christian churches are not, of course, designed for burnt offerings, and come in many sorts of elaborate construction, but all derive from the simple wooden table that our Lord would have used for meals throughout his life. Our church altars represent not a place for burnt offerings but the table used at the last supper and the institution of the eucharist. Our new modern altar, beautifully constructed in oak incorporates another wooden structure as an integral component, the wooden cross which we will think about later.

As soon as the Israelites started to live a settled rather than a nomadic existence, in the time of King David, houses were needed and temples became fixed structures. Early houses had a lot of wood as part of their construction. David 'lived in a house of cedar' but it was Solomon who built the great temple, sending 80,000 men to quarries in Lebanon where they quarried the huge massive blocks of stone which are still evidence in the base of the Jerusalem temple mount. Solomon's original temple was not huge; just 60x30 cubits (only about 50 feet in length). The wood for the temple also came from the cedars of Lebanon, provided by Hiram the king there in exchange for yearly supplies of wheat and olives. Cedar wood was used to line the walls, the

floors were of pine; the inner most holy place was entirely of cedar wood, with no stone left visible, the cedar carved with open flowers and gourds. Here we have the concept that wood is particularly appropriate for a holy place; interesting then, that Japanese Buddhist temples are traditionally built entirely of wood, with perfect joints rather than any iron nails. All such constructions require expert carpenters.

The other wooden construction that we must consider tonight did not require much carpentry skill. The cross on which Christ and many others were crucified was a commonplace at the time, and crucifixion was used by the Romans as a visual deterrent and even as a grisly attraction at Roman games. The condemned person was sometimes forced to carry the crossbeam (the entire cross would have been too heavy and the uprights were fixed permanently in the local place of execution). Why in Jesus' case Simon of Cyrene was given the task we shall never know. What we can know, however, is that this symbol of the ultimate humiliation and degradation of a person has become, for us, a symbol of the ultimate giving of himself by Jesus, so that by his death, without which his resurrection could not have occurred, we are brought closer to God.

Jesus, the carpenter's son, spent all his early years until he started his preaching ministry at about 30 as an assistant helping his father in his trade. We know this only because of disparaging remarks about carpenters recorded in the new testament. It was when Jesus was teaching in his local synagogue in Nazareth that, in amazement, his hearers asked "where does he get this wisdom from, is he not the carpenter's son? (Matthew) or, in Mark, "Is this not this the carpenter, the son of Mary". Clearly carpenters were not thought to be either very bright or well versed in the scriptures. So, what are the aspects of a carpenter's life that would have contributed to Jesus' development and therefore could have relevance for us all?

One skill that carpenters have to develop is the ability to choose the right wood for a particular job; some woods are hard, some are soft, but all have their uses. In his life, Jesus showed a wonderful ability to weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of those around him. Good carpenters always work 'with the grain of the wood'. We need to work with others and fully appreciate their gifts if we are to be effective witnesses and workers in the mission that we believe Jesus would have for our lives.

And finally, carpenters work with wood that was, earlier, a living part of God's creation and which in its natural state is just a tree. It is only when that living tree is cut down and, in a sense dies, that the carpenter can start to craft a fine and beautiful object from the wood. Human beings – as we know only too well – in their natural state are often selfish, aggressive and acquisitive, disregarding the needs of others; in other words, we are prone to be sinful. Like the wood from the tree, it is only when we have died to sin that Jesus the carpenter can work on our lives to make us a little more like himself – truly loving and giving of ourselves for the sake of our neighbours – and be crafted into something that is fine and beautiful for God.