



# BUILDING THE CHURCH

KATHLEEN RUSHTON sets out the implications of Jesus's desire to build the church in Matthew 16:13-20.

**M**atthew's Gospel portrays Jesus as Emmanuel, God-with-us (Mt 1:23). God-with-us is encountered "where two or three are gathered in my name" (Mt 18:20); in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and imprisoned (Mt 25:35-45); and in "discipling" (literal Greek) until the end of the age (Mt 28:19-20). Mindful of this God-with-us framework, which shapes the identity of Jesus and the life of Matthew's community, we can consider two words, "build" and "church", found in Matthew 16:21-30.

## I Shall Build

When Jesus said to Peter: "I shall build (*oikodomeō*) my church," many related words would be familiar to those who

heard him. They would, for example, associate the root word of "build" (*oikodom-*) with family or household (*oikos/oikia*), a household member (*oikiakos*), a builder (*oikosdomos*) and to live or dwell (*oikeō*). And in their biblical tradition they knew that the One who builds is God (Mt 16:18).

Throughout the Scriptures, "to build" speaks of establishing a people (Jer 12:16; 31:4) especially in the sense of restoring God's people after their exile in Babylon. Jesus, son of David (Mt 15:22), whose *basileia* is about lifting burdens from the marginalised, has been building an alternative community since he called the disciples (Mt 4:18-22; 10:1-4), through his teaching (Mt 5-7, 10, 13) and through his actions (Mt 8-9).

## My Church

Roman sovereignty underlies this scene. Jesus and the disciples had walked about 32 kms north of the Sea of Galilee to Caesarea Philippi which was named after the Roman emperor. Its buildings, activities and history were associated with imperial claims and power. In a rock-faced

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cliff was a shrine to Pan, god of shepherds and flocks. A very different shepherd-ruler comes now to shepherd God's people and to contest the purposes of the Roman *basileia*.

The word "church" (*ekklesia* cf. Mt 18:17) was used for the assembly or congregation of the people of God (Deut 9:10; Josh 8:35; 1 Kgs 8:65). In addition, the *ekklesia* was a civic and political assembly of citizens along with a council. Its political, cultural and social role was to gather, to administer and to reinforce the status quo of the reign (*basileia*) of Rome. "My church", then, suggests an alternative society. The people of God, under God's guidance throughout their history in Israel, continues in the *basileia* of God. "My church" is the household of the people of God being built by Jesus and committed to him.

## Implications for Us

Following in this tradition, Pope Francis took the name of St Francis of Assisi whom God instructed "to rebuild my church". And we need to be very clear that we are God's Church. We hold together the two integral strands: the church as institution precedes us and makes us members and the church as the community is made by all its members.

To speak of the priesthood of the laity is not to speak in metaphorical language. Our priesthood is a true participation in the priesthood of Christ through baptism. There are not two classes – empowered and powerless, adults and minors, those who know and those who do not – but a community of love filled by and authorised by the Spirit. This is not to deny the special place of the ordained shepherd but to affirm that their authority rests on their particular call to guiding and building up the Church.

Laity can forfeit to clergy many areas of "building my church" that are rightfully ours by baptism. The community as a whole – clergy and laity together – must exercise the mandate of Jesus to bring all to God. The community as a whole may not have the same charisms and offices within the Church but it is precisely through these differences that the Spirit works.

## Looking Inwards

A trend I have found troubling over the years in the inner life of the church is a male movement of power – from clerics to male laity in church offices. In Aotearoa, a country famous for women leaders as prime ministers, governor generals, chief justices and others, where are the women leaders in church roles?

The Church might be healthier and freer of scandal if laity recognise that we are the Church and that it is our responsibility to hold our ordained and lay leaders accountable spiritually, theologically, financially, legally, and sexually. At this time of striving to set in place safeguarding practices, we must insist that our leaders have training, supervision and spiritual direction.

## Looking Outwards

We can look back over the past months of our COVID-19 journey and hear voices inviting us as Church to a new consciousness of the household of God. We can hear the words of God-with-us, "I shall *build* my church" in the

light of three interconnected household (*oikos*) words which come into our daily language through the German *oekologie*: ecology, economics and ecumenism.

An integral ecology embraces the relationships between plants, animals, people, and their environment, and the balances between these relationships. Economics in our country is moving into a new approach to promoting prosperity through designing economic policies to support wellbeing. Ecumenism comes from a word meaning "the inhabited world" (*oikoumenē*). The urgency and promise of our situation mean that a commitment to love God's creation and to respect for the dignity of every person will necessarily be a central dimension of the life of faith. What a difference the Christian church, which is arguably the largest and most extensively located organisation on the planet, could make by members working together.

And these three interconnected words – ecology, economics and ecumenism – leap out of the pages of *Laudato Si'* which Pope Francis signed off on Pentecost Sunday, 2015. We are part of a new Pentecost in this year of the fifth anniversary of *Laudato Si'* because the Spirit is working in the pain and suffering of Earth, our common home. We require imagination and relationships to recognise the Spirit and to respond in both prophetic and practical ways as we hear the cry of Earth and the cry of the poor. 🙏

24 August: Mt 16:13-20: 21st Sunday Ordinary Time (RL)  
12th After Pentecost (RCL)

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