**A Strong Foundation**

**How the Gospels came to be written**

Sermon by Silvia Purdie

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Bible Reading: Luke 6: 37-49

**Discussion**

*On Powerpoint:*

Discuss:

*Slide 1:*

**Think of something that happened in your family at least 20 years ago. How do you remember it? Do you tell the story at family gatherings? Do you have notes written down about it?**

**When have you heard someone’s teaching that really stayed with you? Could you quote someone you heard long ago?**

… talk about how we remember

what kinds of things do you remember?
What helps you remember details such as words spoken?

This is fascinating background to lead us on to the next question which is this:

*Slide 2:*

**What is your understanding of how the Gospels came to be written?**

*… discuss*

This, to my thinking, is a very important question, because how you answer this question shapes your conviction about Jesus. The four Gospels are an essential starting point to knowing Jesus … but can we trust that what they contain is historical truth?

During my lifetime there have been plenty of people who have challenged this, from both within and outside of the church. I expect you have had some of those conversations here in this room.

Are the Gospels reliable?

**Teaching**

If I might offer my take on this, the conclusions I have come to from what I know of contemporary biblical scholarship.

My understanding is that the three ‘synoptic gospels’ of Mark, Matthew and Luke were written between 25 and 40 years after Jesus’ death. The first to be written was by Mark. Mark is a lively text, full of details about Jesus. It starts with John the Baptist and it finishes at his crucifixion. Scholars agree that the resurrection stories were tagged on to Mark a little later. They also mostly agree that Mark was a friend of Peter, and that the stories recorded in Mark are based on first hand accounts, especially Peter’s memories.

So, Mark wrote it up, and people copied it, and by about 30 years after Jesus died the early churches received a scroll of this very first thing called a ‘gospel’, the Good News according to Mark:
***“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”***

Mark 1:1

What an amazing thing Mark achieved. I am writing books myself, I know how challenging it is.

So then what happened is that in the early church as Mark’s Gospel got sent out and read, 2 men heard at and thought, “wow that is awesome, but there are bits missing. I can improve on it.”

These 2 men were Luke and Matthew. It is one of those odd quirks of history that these 2 men did not know until after they had each finished that someone else was doing the same thing. So we end up with 2 books that are kind of the same but also a bit different from each other, plus Mark makes 3. The early church could have just picked one as the official version, or they could have kept working on them to mash them together and created one compilated Gospel which improved on all 3, but no,

the church decided to honour and keep all 3, even though there is lots of repitition and also lots of points of disagreement. Which has made biblical scholarship challenging ever since!

One of the main things that both Luke and Matthew felt was missing from Mark was more of what Jesus actually said. Mark is strong on action but a bit weak on teaching.

And both Luke and Matthew had another precious document they had received, a record of the teachings of Jesus. So they copied this document in to Mark. In Matthew this becomes the Sermon on the Mount, chapters 5-7, and Luke uses it here and there. Our Bible reading today is Luke 6, which is from this source of the teachings of Jesus. Scholars have called this source ‘Q’, short for ‘source’ in German.

Luke himself explains this whole process right at the very beginning of his Gospel:

“***Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, 2just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first,to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4so that you may know the truth.”*** (Luke 1:1-4)

So Luke describes himself as one among ‘many’ who were tackling the task of accurately recording what happened when Jesus was alive. And of course, Luke then goes on to detail what happened afterwards, in the book of Acts.

I started by asked you what you remember from the past, and how you remember details, stories, events and words. One vital way of remembering the past is through the written word. People who were eyewitnesses, actually there when Jesus taugh the crowds by the lake or on the hillside, some of them wrote down what they remembered. And other people valued these writings and carefully copied them, and sent them out for others to read.

I wonder who write down the collection of Jesus’ words that scholars now call ‘Q’. As a writer I like to relate to the writers of the Bible. And Q is a hidden writing, lost as a text but carefully incorporated into the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. I like to think that maybe the person who wrote Q might have been one of the educated women who followed Jesus. They were ‘eyewitnesses and servants of the word’ - as Luke describes those who also wrote the material which he collated into his Gospel. They were passionate about Jesus, and determined to hand on to future generations what they had experienced first hand.

All of which gets me to the point of feeling actually pretty confident about the historical accuracy of the Gospels. As you read Luke this year through the Lectionary, you might like to listen out for who might have written this down originally, and how Luke used that material. You might look for the links between the Gospels, and notice any points of difference.

The whole point is exactly as Luke wrote down way back nearly 2000 years ago, to know the truth about Jesus.

**Reflection (Application)**

So, having already talked about how we get to have these teachings of Jesus written down for us in Luke, what about the teachings themselves?

How do we read them? How do they work in us?

You have been listening to these words and reading these words probably your whole life. You have been attempting to live out these teachings. They have inspired you and guided you. How amazing is that!

You remember this story about the wise man who built his house upon the rock and the foolish man building on the sand, and you have built houses and churches and businesses and families as best you could on the strong foundation of these teachings.

I honour you and the ways you have lived as faithful people, followers of Christ, for most of your lives.

I feel humbled to work in Christian ministry with generations, like yourselves. It’s not my place to tell you how to live – you have lived it! You know this stuff, these teachings are in your bones.

And I feel for you, because the world is more and more swirling around you and the waters are rising. Perhaps what you thought was solid foundations are more and more threatened by social change and environmental change. Those poor folks in Westport were quite sure that they built their homes and businesses on solid ground, but now they are sinking and getting washed away.

Jesus made the astonishing claim that the only real solid foundation for life was to hear and to live out his teaching.

***“47I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. 48That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built”***

**Come to me, hear my words, act on them.** That’s it. Jesus was pretty blunt, actually. Uncompromising. He didn’t care two hoots about all the other things that people built their lives on – our need for security or finances, our desire for status and being well thought of, our ego and pride and need to achieve things. The teaching of Jesus is not a comfortable tag-on to a normal life.

Yes, we can take feel-good principles from Jesus’ teachings. Integrity, forgiveness, generosity, kindness – no one would argue against these things. But Jesus takes us further, deeper.

**Come to me, hear my words, act on them.**

I am not telling you how to live. You folks have done a fine job of it. I’m just here to say –

Come to Jesus, hear his words, act on them.

At this time in your life, what does this mean for you?

As you maybe have diminishing energy, what does it mean to act on the teachings of Jesus. Perhaps it is now less about the action and more about the heart. Perhaps you are now no longer building foundations with bricks and mortar and more about the faith foundations that transcend roles and jobs and busyness and are more about the soul.

Jesus said, ***“The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.”***

I’d say, don’t worry so much about producing outputs any more. Focus on all that has been laid down in your heart by Jesus all these years. Let that enrich you with the abundance of the heart. That is enough. Jesus said so.