

What are you building at the moment? Maybe an Airfix model of a ship, plane, or tank? – though “grown-up Lego” seems to be the thing nowadays. Some of you will be crafting an essay, or a thesis, or a book. Or you may be a body-builder. If you are a final-year undergraduate you may be setting up interviews with the aim of building a career; and I’m sure all of us are engaged in building relationships of one kind or another. Humans, like animals, are natural builders.

It’s right to be proud of what we are building, or what we have built, or what others have built for us. Here in Oxford we are surrounded by some of the most beautiful buildings in the world, with this college as one of the very best. I’m sure we have all proudly pointed out our favourite views to visitors. Mine is the view from the far end of St Swithun’s, looking back towards the Great Tower, with the other towers and the Grammar Hall framing it in a wonderful triangular composition.

Jesus’ disciples were equally proud of the splendid new Temple that King Herod had been building for decades. It stood a fraction higher than our own 44-metre Great Tower, on a huge platform stretching as far as from here to the Bodleian, and perched another 40 metres above the valley. Wow! they said; what an amazing building!

“Funny you should say that”, Jesus replied. “The whole lot is going to be destroyed.” And less than forty years later the Roman general Titus did indeed destroy it, leaving little more than the platform, which is still pretty impressive. Tragic, in many ways: but also necessary.

I’m not saying, and Jesus wasn’t saying, that beautiful buildings should be destroyed. But there are some hard yet necessary lessons that we need to learn.

The first is pretty obvious, that we must not think that creating something big and beautiful makes us better or more important than others. In the Book of Daniel, several chapters before the passage we heard read this morning, Nebuchadnezzar boasted about his achievement in building the city of Babylon “for the glory of his [own] majesty”, and for that he was struck down and went mad, eating grass like an ox, for seven years. Much earlier, in Genesis, the story of the Tower of Babel reminds us that impressive building projects can be a form of idolatry, taking for ourselves the glory that belongs only to God.

A second lesson is closely related, but perhaps harder to learn. Any human achievement, endeavour or ambition, however good in itself, can become idolatrous. It may be money, or family pride, or sporting prowess, or sexual identity, or virtually anything else. We aren’t called to destroy them, but we are warned not to set them up and worship them as idols.

The third lesson is the most important, and also the easiest to miss. It was not just any building that was going to be destroyed, but the Temple. The Temple was supposed to be the focal point of Jewish worship, and a beacon for other nations too, but it had long ceased to be effective in the way God had intended. Jesus in his own person was going to replace the Temple, offering access to God for everyone without distinction, and shining as the Light of the World. Just as his disciples missed the point, and started talking about times and dates, so we tend to miss the point. Jesus has replaced all religious buildings and systems, and the only thing that matters is our relationship to him. Magdalen College Chapel is beautiful, the music is out of this world, but do you know Jesus, and are you committed to following him and serving him?

I hope you all have wonderful building projects, and I wish you every success with them. But give the glory to God, and put your faith in Jesus, not in anything else.