

Was Jesus really a carpenter?

Thoughts from a life in building

Richard Noble points out that in his teaching Jesus frequently uses examples from the general construction industry rather than carpentry, and argues that it is much more likely that Jesus was what we would today call a general builder. Richard goes on to illustrate from his own experience in construction the challenges that Christians face in the nitty-gritty of daily life, and the solutions Jesus provides.

What was Jesus doing in the years before his public ministry? Tradition has it that he was simply a carpenter, working with his father, Joseph. This tradition is deeply entrenched and celebrated by a wide body of paintings, hymns, songs, poems and other popular writings. However, the evidence is

pretty slim, being based on just two mentions, where the Greek word *tekton* was translated by William Tyndale in the 16th century as ‘carpenter’. Virtually every subsequent English language translation has followed suit. “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of

James and Joses and Judas and Simon ...?” (Mark 6:3) and “Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?” (Matt 13:55)¹

Wood was a scarce commodity in Galilee, and would have been used very



J.E. Millais, *Christ in the House of His Parents ('The Carpenter's Shop')* (1849–50), Tate Britain

sparingly. Floors, preferably on bedrock, were formed of compacted mud; walls built with mud bricks or field stones, sometimes whitewashed; and roofs formed of mud and sticks spanning between tree branches. Wood was used to make tool handles and yokes for farming. Except for the wealthy, furniture was absent or rudimentary. Public buildings and houses for the more wealthy were built from limestone quarried locally but quality timber had to be transported from Lebanon. A useful article describes much of this in detail, citing many sources².

Jesus, in his teaching and in true Hebrew tradition, makes wide use of parable and metaphor. If his former occupation was meaningful to him, might we not expect this to be reflected in his teaching ministry? Instead, we have references to fishing, farming, shepherding, viticulture, building in a more general sense and, most significantly, to money and ownership. In the gospels Jesus rarely used metaphors based on wood. The two notable examples are

removing the beam from one's own eye before criticising the mote in a brother's (Matt 7:3-5) and comparing green and dry wood when he speaks to the lamenting women on the way to the cross (Luke 23:31).

The fact is, however, that the word *tektion* has other meanings such as a craftsman, an artisan or a worker in stone. Is it not more likely that 'Joseph and Sons' was the local building business?³.

The word *tektion* appears again in the epistles where Paul describes himself as an *architekton*, chief or 'master builder', in laying the foundation for the church. He expands the metaphor with a range of materials for building upon the foundations (1 Cor 3:10-13). We know that Paul himself was a tent maker (Acts 18:1-3), and, in the Middle East today, tents are still an important form of built accommodation. Rendering this metaphor as 'master builder' would have had real significance for him and makes far more sense than 'head carpenter'.

In contrast to the paucity of references to wood in the Gospels, there are several powerful images relating to building. Jesus likens Peter to the stone (or rock) on which he will build his church (Matt 16:18). He quotes from Psalm 118 about the selection and rejection of stone for building implying this as a metaphor for himself, the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone (Matt 21:42-44). He compares a person who hears and acts on his words as someone who digs deep to build on solid rock; but when someone hears without acting it is like building straight off the soil, with their work being washed away under flood water (Matt 7:24-25). Jesus relates the accidental collapse of a tower at Siloam killing 18 people to make the point that victims of accidents are no more sinners than anyone else (Luke 13:4). He likens the whitewash on the walls of tombs to the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 23:27-28). He talks about tearing down barns and building bigger ones (Luke 12:18). When warning about the



cost of discipleship, he even likens it to calculating the cost of building a tower to make sure there's enough money to finish it, so as to avoid the ridicule of leaving bare foundations (Luke 14:28-30).

Indeed, when it comes to matters of money, Jesus has much to say, and the Gospel record shows his concern extending to affairs of ownership, trading, and employment. References to such affairs of the world are even stronger and more numerous than those about wood, stone and building. The notion of "Joseph and Sons, Building Contractors" gathers traction!

A thought occurs to me about Capernaum and the time Jesus spent there (Matt 4:13, 18:22). Situated on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, it was the main port for the lake, and boat owners might well have brought their boats there for repairs to the woodwork. It could be that Jesus spent some of his time working on the boats and, if so, it is quite possible that he first met Peter in that context. Anyway, if Jesus's experience was in construction, it makes sense for him to choose Peter, a boat owner and fisherman, as the human foundation for his Gospel and Paul, an occupational tent maker, as the foundation for his church beyond the Jewish faithful. This seems to suggest that hands-on experience in the world of human affairs might be an important ingredient in Christian ministry. In a series of interviews⁴ with entrepreneurs who were also Christians, an issue that was raised several times concerned the need for pastoral care during times of business difficulty. Due to lack of familiarity with the world of affairs few ministers were in a position to provide help or understanding. Instead, the business entrepreneur tended to be viewed simply as a source of financial support for the church.

As a former construction engineer, my own experience of moving into the theological environment is

relevant and makes this a topic of personal interest. To cut a long story short, from early beginnings when I was working with the well-known Consulting Engineers, Ove Arup and Partners, I noticed a lack of familiarity on the part of designers with the practical implications of their designs on the builders and their workmen who were going to have to bring them to fruition. When I was invited to work on the geometry of the shell roofs of the Sydney Opera House, I decided instead to join a firm that had won the contract for building a new college in Cambridge. As the engineer on site I had the responsibility of sorting out a host of problems inherent in the design of the prestigious buildings⁵. My subsequent career led me from building contracting to specialist subcontracting, from employee to employer, and eventually to business owner and several years of financial success. During these years I was exposed to all the cut and thrust of business, such as: the extent to which large organisations abuse their power at the expense of smaller firms down the supply chain, commercial bullying, fierce competition, problems of cash flow, and strategies for survival in the wake of product failure. I repeatedly found myself being moved as 'trouble-shooter' from one situation to another. In all of this, my faith and answers to prayer repeatedly came to the rescue. But seldom did I encounter sympathetic interest from clergy.

At the peak of a highly profitable period I remember praying "surely, God, there is more to life than this!". I did not know then how abruptly and drastically my prayer would be answered, with failure of the business during a severe recession in house building. Surprisingly, I felt quite secure as I sought God's new direction and, six months later, I

found myself heading up the finances and administration of Ridley Hall Theological College in Cambridge. The next ten and a half years of full employment before retirement were the most fulfilling and happy of my working life. There seemed to be no end to the way my building and business experiences transferred almost directly into the context of this prayerful Christian community, seeing it through some challenging and formative times. One of my very first callings was to help secure the continuation of the endeavour that was to become *Faith in Business*.

Early on I became aware of the extent to which some mature students felt the pain of leaving their former occupations behind. Recruiting the voluntary services of a former telephone engineer, a tree surgeon, a landscape gardener and a computer expert were examples of harnessing occupational skills in the service of both God and the needs of the college. In some cases the apparent sidelining of secular skills and experience during the process of spiritual formation seemed to cause a real sense of grief.

I wondered: What did Jesus have to say about worldly affairs that might have been prompted by his working experience in the material world? The Gospel record is abundant with such sayings. The parable of the Prodigal Son involves inheritance, the dividing of property, extravagance, the squandering of wealth and employment (Luke 15:11-32). Jesus speaks of a worker being content with his pay (Luke 3:14) and worthy of his wages (Luke 10:7), while the parable of the workers in the vineyard speaks of a caring employer (Matt 20:1-13). The advice to settle matters quickly and avoid going to court might well come from someone who has observed how contractual

'My faith and answers to prayer repeatedly came to the rescue'

disputes can escalate (Matt 5:25). Parables about financial acumen and investing for growth witness to an understanding of business principles (Luke 16:1-8 and 19:11-27). There are copious texts backing up his truth, “My kingdom is not of this world” and warning against depending on worldly wealth, with many texts about where true value is to be found⁶. These are underlined by his axiom “No one can serve two masters.... You cannot serve both God and money” (Matt 6:24). Yet when Jesus is questioned about his associating with tax collectors and sinners, he makes it clear that his Kingdom activity is in the nitty-gritty of our world of material reality by stating his purpose: not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance (Luke 5:27-32).

Working in the climate of spiritual formation at a theological college was a further formative experience

‘Jesus ... makes it clear that his Kingdom activity is in the nitty-gritty of our world of material reality.’

for myself. This must have been a significant ingredient in what followed my time at Ridley Hall. While praying for discernment on the way ahead, the prompting in my prayer time was a single word ‘prisons’. This led to a fruitful spell of fifteen years working as a prison chaplaincy volunteer. At first this consisted in providing friendship to ‘lifers’, then working in restorative justice with both mature and young offenders and victims of crime, and culminated eventually with a small team encouraging men through bible study to become disciplers themselves of their neighbouring residents. Now, having attained the age of four score years and handed in my access to prison keys, God has given me an even more challenging word than before. I know not yet where it might lead.

So what is the lesson to be drawn from the occupation of Jesus and my

own experience? Here, at least, are four clear points.

- Never doubt that we are in the safe hands of the Architect of the Universe. If we get our priorities right we need have no worries (Matt 6:25-34).
- An occupation in business can be a valuable ingredient of ministry, whether ordained or lay. Indeed, for an effective ministry in the nitty-gritty world of Monday to Friday one might consider it essential.
- Be sure that every experience, however painful, can be put to good use. Over and over again I have been impressed by the way God has used the experience of both reformed criminals and victims of crime and misfortune to minister to people in similar circumstances.
- There’s no knowing what changes and challenges might lie ahead. We worship our ‘God of Surprises’ so never get stuck in the mud. Always pray for discernment. Test the water and look out for signposts to the way ahead. 

1 Ken M Campbell, ‘What was Jesus’ occupation?’, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*(JETS) 48/3 (September 2005) 501-19, https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/48/48-3/JETS_48-3_501-519.pdf

2 Steve Lemke, ‘House Construction in the First Century’, *BI*, Fall 2009 pp 25-27. Available on the St John Lutheran Church website, Ohio USA. <http://www.stjohnlutheran-elyria.org/images/10-21%20House%20Construction%20in%20the%201st%20Century.pdf>

3 An interesting parallel to Tyndale’s use of ‘carpenter’ rather than ‘builder’ is where, rather than translating the Greek word *katalyma* as ‘guest chamber’ as he does at Lk 22:11, he uses (no room at the) ‘inn’ at Lk 2:7. The idea of the holy family being turned away has stuck in the Christmas story. See Kenneth E Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, SPCK, 2008. pp 31-35 for a rational explanation of reception into a friendly family living space, with its manger, due to their guest room already being occupied.

4 See Richard Higginson and Kina Robertshaw, *A Voice to be Heard: Christian Entrepreneurs Living out their Faith*, IVP, 2017, ch.14.

5 Alison Wilson, *Changing Women’s Lives, a biography of Dame Rosemary Murray*(founding president of Murray Edwards College, Cambridge), Unicorn Press, 2014, pp 148 & 149 (photographs supplied and help given on construction aspects of the author’s text.)

6 Matt 6:1-4, 19:21; Luke 6:24-25, 9:25, 12:16-21; Matt 6:19-21/Luke 12:33-34; Luke 21:1-4/Mark 12:41-44



Richard Noble became Bursar of Ridley Hall Theological College in Cambridge after a career in construction and business management. Following retirement in 2003, he has served as a prison chaplaincy volunteer and as an Authorised Lay Minister in his local parish church of St Mary’s Buckden, while continuing to enjoy his lifetime activity as a painter. He and his wife Rachel live near St Neots in Cambridgeshire. As well as various published articles, Richard is author of *The Writing on the Wall – Everyday Phrases from the King James Bible*, Sacristy Press, 2015.