"Cement & Clay"

In the past ten years or so I've developed a liking for working with bricks and mortar. Just small jobs, mind you, nothing too grand. I prefer the decorative projects rather than buildings, and since I get involved with most of these projects in my spare time, I really need to have the flexibility to walk away from the project for a while, if necessary.

After I had mixed by hand more cement and mortar than I care to remember, I bought a small mixer, one that will handle about 240lbs at a time. What a difference this made to my recovery time. Anyone who's ever had to mix a ton of cement with a shovel will know what I mean, especially if you're a weekend warrior like I am.

It doesn't take long to get the recipe right for a good mix you can work with, and once you do get it right, each project is made so much easier and quicker. A post or two ago I mentioned that I have been setting brick in the front of our home, and that I enjoy the lessons that working with cement seems to teach me about life. So I thought, while some of these parallels are fresh in my mind, I would make an attempt at jotting them down. Here goes. ...

"There are mortars that can support many, many tons of bricks"
There are lots of recipes for making concrete. Some recipes are very simple: three shovelfuls of gravel, two of sand, one of cement, and water to mix. This is about as basic as cement-mixing gets. When it comes to mortar (the compound that goes between the bricks), there are many different levels to choose from depending upon how much weight is expected to be carried by the base bricks. There are mortars that can support many, many tons of bricks.

Getting the foundation right can be critical, especially if you're putting up a building. It's helpful if the foundation is level, square and sufficient.

Once you start laying brick, there is a certain amount of flexibility regarding filling and shaping the mortar, and if you need to fudge things into being a little more square, now is the time to do it.

Several hours into the project there comes a time when you have to "strike" the mortar. Striking can take on various forms, and really doesn't do much more than make the wall look pretty or robust. There comes a time in the process of fashioning bricks and mortar when no adjustment can be made at all -- no smoothing, no shaping, no striking. Once the mortar has set and cured, the only way to change anything is to tear the project up and begin again. "Set in concrete" is an expression that really lives up to its name.

I remember a time when my neighbors poured a cement driveway, a pretty driveway, shaped and sculpted; it was gorgeous. A couple of hours after fashioning the surface a random rainstorm came through and completely washed the top off. The next day the entire driveway was power-tooled out of there and another truckload of cement had to be poured. There was no way to redeem what had been marred.

"The job is really worth doing well"

Unless you happen to be one of those highly-skilled masons who have an eye and a hand for getting the job done quickly, bricklaying is something which shouldn't be rushed. Once the bricks are in place, you are going to have to look at them for a long time, so the job is really worth doing well, or at least as well as you are able.

Cement, of course, is a man-made invention. And as simple as cement may look, the process of making cement powder requires some serious mathematical skills and, nowadays, a good eye for what's going on under the microscope.

The closest thing in the natural world to cement is clay. Let's talk about clay for a moment or two.

Clay, with various compositions, comes out of the ground. Clay has been around for a long time. Bible writers draw some clever illustrations from clay regarding how a man has been fashioned like clay from the dust of the earth by the hand of God. Clay can be fashioned, but it doesn't set up all by itself, it needs an outside force -- heat ... lots of heat.

The school I attended as a child provided pottery classes, and I had many opportunities to make ashtrays, vases and coasters. I lacked any sculpting skill whatsoever, so anything I produced looked simply pathetic compared to how the example looked in the books we had been given. Most of what I fashioned got no further than the wheel. In fact, most of the productions of the entire class were scraped up and put back in the bath to be wetted down and re-used.
"Never more could the clay be returned to the bath to be re-used"

 Occasionally, though, a pupil produced a "lump" that gained the admiration of our teacher, the master potter. This finely crafted ware was deemed worthy of preserving, and was set aside to be put in the kiln. The kiln is a high-powered oven producing temperatures as high as 2,000 or 3,000 degrees F. This is the heat necessary to "fire" the clay so that it can be preserved in the shape it has been given, in most instances in our class: a vase or a jug.

 For many hours this worthy vessel sat in this intense heat undergoing a chemical and structural adjustment that would change it forever. Never more could the clay be returned to the bath to be re-used.

 Once the heat went off, the work, now called pottery, cooled slowly. The student approached and announced to his eye-rolling classmates in his best Shakespearean voice, "My jug is finished!" "Not so fast," came the response from the teacher, "There's more to be done." The entire class grew silent as we were introduced to the concept of the rest of the process.

 What looked to me like fine, wet crystals were brushed on the now cooled jug. I don't remember how they were adhered, maybe just water. Doesn't matter -- they stuck. This coating was called the glaze. As well as making the jug look shiny, the glaze also stops the jug from being porous. I suppose a jug that leaked its contents wouldn't be much good in the grand scheme of earthenware. The glaze didn't work right away, the jug had to be put back into the red hot oven for many more hours, until the glaze melted and coated the jug.

 "Now we give it a design and make it unique"

 Again the heat went off, the jug was removed and cooled, and its maker again announced that it was finished. But again the response from the teacher was, "Not Yet. Now we give it a design and make it unique." The pupil was given a paintbrush and what looked to me like ordinary paint. After all these years the details are a little hazy, so I'm thinking it was probably more than just paint. A pattern was painted on the jug and another coat of glaze was applied. The jug was then returned to the oven.

 At last the pupil made the final announcement, "My jug is finished!" With a crafty look and carrying a container of water and a glass, the teacher approached the pupil admiring his jug. The teacher poured some of the water into the jug and handed the jug to the pupil. The teacher then stretched out his arm holding the glass, and the pupil filled the glass from his jug. "Now," said the teacher, "Your jug is finished." The lesson, of course, was simple, only when the jug fulfilled the "purpose" for which it had been created could it actually be said that it was "complete."

 So what lessons do I get from these observations?

 Regarding the bricks and mortar, I see the heart and mind of a man or woman as being in a pretty constant state of fluidity, or maybe stickiness. There is a years-long moment of settling into ourselves while we decide how we "see things." Sometimes the foundation we build upon is not always as square as we would like. But that's one of the nicest things about working with bricks and mortar: there's a certain amount of tolerance available as we pull things around a little and chew things over. Just because we might have started out on a base that wasn't entirely level or square doesn't mean we can't shift things as needed. And honestly, did any of us start on a level footing?
But what about the clay?

Well, the lesson of the clay is even easier for me to see. Here we are, just as basic as can be. We are made from the dust of the ground. We are shaped, not just by our Creator, but also by our ongoing circumstances. The heat comes on ... and on ... and on, until we are fixed in the shape we have assumed or have been given. We are given unique characteristics, both by God, and by our circumstances. Marks are applied that make it obvious Who put them there. More heat ... and more heat ... and yet more. But then, and only then, are we filled with that for which we were prepared. It seems to me that God must have a method of sending heat our way at just the right times, and at just the right intensity -- not too much and not too little. There is a final "sealing" spoken of in the Bible that I'm not sure how to place in my metaphor, because if I have to put the sealing at the end, then it would mean that a person would not be entirely useful as a "giving" vessel until things on planet earth were just about over, and right now I'm not sure I subscribe to that thought. I guess we'll get back to that some other time.

"If Jesus was ever an example of what a person was made for, surely is it that we are made to give"

For now it seems to me that a man or a woman is an ultimate vessel for the Spirit of God. The Apostle Paul reminds us that people are each a temple for God to live in. Paul doesn't say that God will "at some point" live in us, he says that God "already" lives in us (1 Cor. 3:16, 17). And I don't hesitate to suggest that only when the Spirit of God is poured "out of us" for the benefit of the refreshment of others can we actually say that we are complete, or mature, or fulfilled, or perfectly finished. A jug that provides none of its water is no better than a cloud drifting lazily across the desert giving no rain. If Jesus was ever an example of what a person was made for, surely is it that we are made to give -- vessels to be filled and channels for God to pour out of.

We could go a lot further with the analogy, but it may be that you don't share my enthusiasm for bricks, mortar and pottery, so here would be a good spot to settle and dry. But I do hope I've caused you to look differently upon your mortal frame.

And that's just my take on it ....

TonyHarriman.BlogSpot.com

Click Here to read past posts to the Blog "What's It All About?"