St Peter the Fisherman – Whitianga
Sunday November 14th 2021

Theme: (Luke 12 – (Division brought by Christ’s message)

I runga i te ingoa o te papa, te tama, me te wairua tapu.

*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*

*Amen*

Today’s gospel is again one that most preachers would prefer be addressed by someone else. It isn’t helped by the supporting readings which, while referencing the vineyard image so often used in both the old and New Testaments, are all pretty tough on the consequences of non-delivery of God’s wishes. All this meaning the lives of God’s followers will have expectations many of the people listening won’t want to face.

So – what is the meaning of the tough love we have been doled out today? I talk a lot about God’s endless and accepting love for each of us, and that is helpful when we feel we might have messed up a bit – or a lot. However, we know as parents that endless love doesn’t preclude being angry when we do mess up. That’s what Isaiah is getting at over the issues of vineyards and vines which aren’t producing what God as the vintner, hopes for from the nurturing given them. We can understand that. It’s a “why am I bothering?” with yet another fall from grace of a loved child or sibling. In spite of it all, God still carries on with the continuing forgiveness and (at times) long-suffering “let’s just try that once more shall we?” hope, that we will finally live as God desires, rather than what we wilfully determine.

But – what Luke says adds another potentially distasteful element to all this. Following Jesus is not going to be a fairyland trip singing the Beatles song ‘All you need is love’, in tune, and dancing gracefully along to sweet music, permanently surrounded by like-minded soul mates. We get an unpleasant but possibly recognisable reality check. It’s one of those ‘good news/bad news’ moments.

Here's the good news, as John described it. “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life”.* Plus, as Paul later explained it to the Corinthians, *‘I gave you the message that I received. I told you the most important truths: that Christ died for our sins, as the Scriptures say;**that he was buried and was raised to life on the third day, as the Scriptures say; and that he appeared to Peter and then to the twelve apostles.’*

We are happier with Jesus as the saviour and peacemaker rather than the home breaker, but Luke brings a message from Jesus that is much more sober, articulating the reality of the challenges we may face by following him.

*“Do you think that I have come to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three”.*

This is right up there in the list of hardest saying in the Gospels. It is followed by a fairly frustrated comment over the fact that even this far through his ministry, still followed by crowds of people who thought he was going to magically save them from the Roman occupation of their land, *“you know how to interpret the earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”*  He was clearly underwhelmed that even though they could read the weather patterns they still couldn’t recognise that the reality of his presence was going to mean a very stormy future life for those who stuck with him. Well, we all know what happened at his crunch time – ‘Crucify him’ was the call, and they all disappeared like mist in the sunshine.

Today’s reading from Hebrews, while emphasising the rewards of faith, also points out that people have received some very bad dealings as a result of their Christian faith – made destitute, persecuted, tormented, even tortured and killed.

We know, even if it isn’t in our own households, that there are families where members who believe and trust in Jesus and his message, are derided, laughed at, even scorned. Take that out to larger groups, such as communities, workplaces, social gatherings, and volunteer organisations. There’s a fair chance that most of us here have experienced those negative attitudes, but how often do we respond with clear statements of our beliefs? Or do we take the easier path of just keeping quiet about them, except in the safe company of other committed Christians?

I confess, I am still surprised at coming across people who are willing to deride and scorn my faith, in front of me – even when they know I am a priest, and even within this very building. I know from the words in Matthew’s writing of Jesus’ sermon on the mount, “*if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, and if anyone wants to take your coat, give your cloak as well”,* that Jesus also wants me to respond to this behaviour with kindness, remembering his earlier words in the text we call the Beatitudes, but today’s passage makes it clear Jesus was fully aware of the trials and divisions his followers would face.

It has always been like that, and any idea that any period of Christianity was free of those divisive situations is truly naïve. We have always been in a world where we are among people who were threatened by our faith, and showed that in aggression, oppression, isolation, or ostracism. Jesus was incredibly aware of the consequences that would arise from his presence and example – not just to himself, but at a variety of levels, to all his followers. Today’s text is the reminder that being a Christian is not for the faint-hearted.

However, let us never forget, that the rewards are great, and we don’t even have to wait for them all. Hanging out with Jesus, alone or with other Christians, is a really good place to be, and knowing we will be with him forever, is an even better one.

Amen