St Peter the Fisherman – Whitianga
Sunday October 2nd 2022

Theme: (Luke 17:5-10)

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*

Mmm. Today we have a couple of apparently quite random messages from Jesus to his Apostles. The first couple of verses in this morning Gospel reading have Jesus telling his disciples they only needed a small amount of faith to be able to achieve great things. These are the verses that tend to get the greatest concentration and general exhortation from preachers to their congregations and produce popular children’s songs as well.

(Faith as small as a mustard seed)

The analogy of a Mustard tree was mentioned by all three Synoptic Gospel writers, with Matthew and Mark writing about another reference Jesus made to one.

*(“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.”)*

Thus the mustard seed has a significant message used by Jesus on at least two occasions.

However, Luke has Jesus giving the Apostles a bit of a backside kick for their apparent self-pity over their general failure to operate at the level of healing that they thought they could achieve – with relatively little effort on their part.  They had just failed to cast a demon out of a small boy and Jesus uses the analogy of the “mustard seed faith”, or the lowest level of faith anyone can have, which is simply, **genuinely,** to believe. The Apostles could not fulfil that because they had always actually relied on Jesus to do the believing. They were heading for big problems if they would always expect Jesus to be physically present in order for them to have faith. Time for them to actually ‘have faith and do’, as opposed to ‘thinking about faith and letting Jesus do’. Not only does Jesus decline the Apostles request, he piles criticism on top of it.

Having done the metaphorical rap over the knuckles for that, Jesus moves on to a more significant communication, which is very tempting to glide over.

Jesus intensifies their discomfort with his parable concerning slave-owners and their slaves. The parable first invites the Apostles to identify with the slave-owners: literally, “Which one of you, having a slave ploughing or tending sheep. . . ?” We cannot read this parable and apply a 21st Century context. We need to remember that slaves were an integral part of life in Jesus’ time. Here, we are to imagine a person with resources sufficient to own a slave but not one wealthy enough to assign different slaves to diverse tasks. This poor slave works out in the fields *and* in the home. The parable shifts focus in verse 10, calling the listeners to identify with the slaves. Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? A “good” slave does not expect thanks for doing what is his job.

We could read both parts of this reading as rebukes of the apostles. They ask for more faith, just as we do. In reply, Jesus scolds them for lacking even mustard seed faith and then also suggests they should not expect reward or praise for their service. That feels a bit tough.

However, in this light, mustard seed faith and being modest about discipleship may be just what we need. By God’s grace, discipleship doesn’t require unshakable confidence or spectacular accomplishments. Luke’s Jesus indeed makes extraordinary demands of his disciples, yet sometimes being a disciple just requires ordinary and daily practices of faith and service. Neither of which may be known to anyone but God. And, much as it is nice to have our efforts praised, neither of which **need** to be known to anyone but God, if we are truly trying to follow Jesus and be like him. Jesus was never asking God for praise over any of the guidance he gave, the parables he told, or the miracles he performed. He knew God knew, and that was all that mattered.

It is hard in today’s world of significant reward and gratification expectation, to let that go, and do what God would like, understanding that God may be the only one who recognises our actions. No wordly brownie points, no thanks, no praise, no millions of Facebook ‘likes’.

 In other words, Jesus is saying don’t expect a pat on the head for being such a super disciple. You’ll be doing no more than what you’ve seen me do, and what I do is what I’ve seen my Father do.  It’s the family way in the kingdom of God and when you act in accordance with who you are by God’s grace, that’s wonderful but you’ll just have to pardon me if we don’t crank up the angel choir with the Hallelujah Chorus each time you do a good deed, or make an effort to do something for God when it isn’t very convenient.  This is just how it goes in life.  Deal with it and let’s move on.”

As I have said before, being a Christian, that is, being a disciple of Christ, is not for the faint-hearted or the ego-needy. This really is the nitty-gritty reality of life. We have to deal with “Faith and Duty” on a daily basis, even as we learn how to live as a Christian sister or brother to John, Phil, Judy, Barbara . . . “Faith and Duty” really is like a daily “To Do” list.  We maybe don’t like it, but this is very often what the life of grace simply must look like.

The upshot of Jesus’ words are a response to earlier comments from the Apostles that indicate they perhaps thought that loving the unlovable and forgiving even repeat offenders constituted some lofty act of super-Christian living.  Jesus tells them that this is not so: they already had all they needed to lead Godly lives that exude grace and forgiveness.  What’s more, exhibiting those traits needed to be considered routine, not so extraordinary as to warrant great spectacles of celebration.

We have just recently witnessed the end of the life of Queen Elizabeth the second; a remarkable woman who quietly dedicated her whole long life to living out what she clearly believed to be God’s hope and expectations of her – a life of total service to others, an outstanding example of exactly what Jesus is talking about in today’s text. I don’t believe for one minute that she ever expected any great reward on earth for doing what she believed was her Christian expectation. Our reward comes when we stand before God, and hopefully hear the words, “well done, good and faithful servant, ……. enter into the joy of your master”. We don’t need anything more than that.

Amen