St Peter the Fisherman – Whitianga
Christmas Eve 2022

Theme: (Christmas in a new land)

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.*

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Spoiler Alert! In spite of the fact we have been singing songs for the past few weeks that reflect a Christmas world in Winter, Winter can’t have been the season when Jesus was born. There are a few obvious reasons for that conclusion.

There’s no way Emperor Augustus would have demanded a Census be taken during Winter – when it was clear people would have to travel to their original home, or heritage, towns, and his own troops would need to be doing duty to make sure the registrations were done.

(Joseph and Mary)

In Joseph’s case (and probably, similarly, for many others) it was a significant distance of about 145 kilometres. Travelling for about 8 hours a day, that would take between 4 and 6 days – Joseph walking, and Mary, as we know close to the end of her pregnancy, riding on a donkey. This also meant effectively camping out, in the company of other similar travellers. Not a Winter activity, even in Judea – where Winter temperatures (December to February) ranged between 5 and 10 Celsius, and it frequently snows, of course.

(Nativity scene)

The ’not Winter’ also explains why the stable/animal shelter was empty so Joseph could use it. The animals would have been sheltered there in Winter. It also explains why the shepherds could be out in the fields, watching over their sheep – herds that were miniscule compared with those with which we are familiar here in Aotearoa New Zealand. None of which detracts from the pleasure of singing about sleigh bells, Good King Wenceslas, white Christmas, and walking in a Winter Wonderland – which we now know Joseph didn’t.

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So, when we sing about “not on a snowy night; but on a Summer day; gathered on grassy ground; in the land we call blessed,” we are indeed celebrating that glorious birth in a place and climate that is closer to the real event than our forefathers,- (mostly from those cold Winter locations),- held close to themselves for comfort when they too were displaced from their former homes; coming, like Joseph and Mary, to a totally unknown environment.

(Mary and Joseph)

Two extraordinary sets of journeys. One that was walked and donkey-ridden to what was an unfamiliar location which would have seemed a world away from Joseph and Mary’s home in Nazareth, now to what was effectively a foreign world of Bethlehem in Judea.

(Immigrant ships)

The other, groups of very ordinary people on extraordinary journeys in small ships to the other side of the world, to begin a completely new life in an unknown land. One journey enforced, the other chosen, in the hope of a better future. The first journey **created** the faith to which we now belong. The second **transferred** that faith to a population which until then, knew nothing about it. An incredible act of bravery as we look back on that first Christmas here. Accommodation in tents, with probably no better sanitation or ablution facilities than Joseph and Mary experienced.

(Samuel Marsden)

Yet, our Christian faith was brought here, and planted here, thanks to the indigenous New Zealanders who willingly believed and received it. It took root and grew here, and we reaffirm that faith every time we gather to worship. The gospel reading from Luke I just shared with you is exactly the reading which Rev. Samuel Marsden used in that very first Christmas Day service at Oihi, in the Bay of Islands. He spoke to the local Maori to whom this Christian faith was being introduced, with his friend Ruatara the Ngapui chief translating; to the crew of the sailing ship ‘Active” which had brought him; and to the British immigrants who had already made this place their new home.

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It is that telling and retelling of Jesus’ birth, life, death and resurrection that defines us as followers of Christ, and thus makes us Christians. It’s part of our DNA, and once a year – at least – we need to be reminded of its specialness, and the really ordinary, but incredible people who were chosen by God to bring about and witness this first most amazing event that over the next 2,000+ years, has influenced the lives of millions upon millions of people.

(Advent candles)

During this past four weeks, we have been looking at how each of the four themes of Advent; Hope, Faith/Love, Joy, and Peace, might relate to our life experiences. During that time we have reflected on what might be our own hopes, our own desire to love and be loved, our own understanding of what brings us joy, our own desires for peace in our world.

On this day, we could also reflect on what hopes God may have for each of us, how could our relationship with God bring us internal peace and joy, and finally, faithfully accept we are indeed truly and unconditionally loved by a creator who proves that to us every Christmas day, with the reminder that we are worth the gift of Jesus God has given us.

(Nativity scene)

Second spoiler alert. God is not Santa. There are not multitudes of gifts which may or may not be welcome, which may or may not be lasting. God gives us just one gift, his only son, a unique and extraordinary gift that if we accept it, does last for ever. We have good reason to do that and give thanks for our good fortune.

Amen.