St Peter the Fisherman – Whitianga
Sunday May 21st

Theme: (Luke 24 – Jesus’ Ascension)

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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*

I’m having a bit of a nostalgia trip this week. Ascension Day, being the day, as I have occasionally reflected, of my confirmation – a couple of centuries ago, by the then Bishop Simkin, a formidable figure to this twelve-year-old.

I also love the popular song “Time to Say Goodbye”, which is what the Ascension of Jesus is all about. Plus, I still vividly remember various of the text components in the Holy Communion section of the original Church of England Book of Common Prayer. Among them – just after we have ‘acknowledged and bewailed our manifold sins and wickedness’, right at the beginning of the Eucharist, I was always then cheered up when the priest said:-

Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith to all who truly turn to him –

‘Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you’

Two weeks ago, our Gospel reading from John included some of my favourite ‘comfortable words’, always guaranteed to ‘refresh me’ when my ‘travail’ is in danger of overwhelming me -

In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

Jesus had said these words to his disciples during their last supper together, and now, 40 days after his resurrection, and re-appearance to them, he was putting those words into action. This was the closing scene of Jesus’ time on earth, his ‘time to say goodbye’. Not a ‘goodbye forever’ but a ‘goodbye for now as I’m just off to get your places sorted for when I see you again’. Plus, almost his last words to his disciples were a restatement of his promise that God would send his advocate and guide, the Holy Spirit, the third component of the Holy Trinity, to be the power enabling them to go out into the world now and become Christ’s witnesses.

I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed on power from high.

All of this to come in next week’s chapter of **our** special story.

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Today, in the full view of many disciples, not just Peter or the two on the way to Emmaus, the resurrected, glorified Lord appears, complete with his body of “flesh and bones” (24:39), “the Christ” in the fullest sense of this title appears to the disciples. He proves that he **is** himself, physically resuscitated, by encouraging his gathered followers to examine and touch his wounded hands and feet, and to share their meal with him. Luke captures their joyous feelings, their almost disbelieving sight as their Saviour stands before them. In our mind’s eye we can see their trembling hands, their weakened knees, their quiet tears, as they stretch out their hands to touch his hands and bow their knees to feel his feet.

It must have been such a challenge for these people really to grasp the unthinkable – even though Jesus had told them many times what would happen to him.

We also have a bit of a challenge in the way Luke has written this passage. We know from all the other accounts of Jesus’ post resurrection appearances, including what Luke himself wrote in the Book of Acts of the Apostles, that he was around for 40 days following his resurrection. Yet the implication from today’s text is that it was virtually straight after this appearance where he took the disciples out to Bethany and was carried up into heaven.

Literary licence, I think, because Luke was focused at that point on closing off Jesus’ earthly life, knowing that his next piece of writing would begin with a slightly fuller description of the Ascension, along with the lead in for what he knew of the next phase of implementing God’s plan for these people who were his most reputable witnesses.

This was Jesus’ last piece of work on earth, and like any good teacher, he did a revision with the disciples where he summarised all the pertinent parts of the Scriptures and reminded them of his own predictions about himself that had come true. All intended to reinforce who he was, and to build their confidence for the next stage of God’s mission.

Yes, Jesus was saying goodbye, but it was a goodbye that was all about moving them on to the next phase of their larger relationship with God; now they would have the Holy Spirit as their GPS.

(Learner driver)

It was very much like the learner driver who has had the instructor present in a dual control car, safely and constantly teaching everything necessary to become a competent independent driver.

(handing over keys)

Then, the instructor stepping out of the car says “you can manage without me right beside you now, and I am giving you not just a driver’s licence and a GPS, but a personal assistant who will show you the **best** way to drive. Off you go. You’ve got this.”

Bingo! Finally the penny drops. Finally they truly knew this was their Messiah, the Christ, and everything he had told them was true. They had wanted to believe, but it had been such a big ask – especially for those who had not actually seen Jesus since his resurrection.

Luke is gentler over this than John was with Simon:

Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

This is the space we are in. We are asked to believe even though we also may not have seen Jesus. As well as Jesus’ appearance in that room, it was in the sharing of a meal (the breaking of bread, the eating of a piece of fish) and in the opening of their minds to the meaning of the scriptures, that the disciples finally believed.

(Bible and Eucharist)

We come together to reread, and listen again to, those Scripture passages, then re-experience sharing that meal. That is how we confirm, reaffirm, and keep alive, the memories and recorded ‘diaries’ of those who were present during those momentous events.

Then, we take away from that sharing experience the goodbye, which is, as Jesus had made clear, not a final farewell, but a promise.

In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

Followed by:

I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed on power from high.

Next week we celebrate that power, that advocate, that guide, that support – the gift of The Holy Spirit to all who believe, having actually seen, or not seen.

Until then ………

Amen