St Peter the Fisherman – Whitianga
Sunday September 3rd 2023

E te Atua aroha, e te Atua atawhai, kia whakapainga koe.

(God of love, God of grace, we give you thanks).

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The gospel of Matthew is the focus for most of Year A in our Three Year Lectionary and we have been working through some of the key ‘sound bites’ found there for the past few weeks. It seems appropriate to revisit just what the writer of this gospel was so keen to communicate and why.

(The Gospels)

Brief synopsis of a longer set of sessions I covered here back in 2020. Each of the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—paints a slightly different portrait of Jesus. All four gospels were intended for different audiences, and that is what makes each one unique in how the story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection are told. If we want to learn about the things Jesus said and did, we have to turn to these ancient texts, believed possibly to have been [written by eyewitnesses or people who spoke with them](http://zondervanacademic.com/blog/who-wrote-gospels/) during the first century. The oral traditions within the church formed the substance of the Gospels, the earliest book of which is Mark, which was then used as a source for Matthew and Luke. Despite those traditional ascriptions to authorhood, all four are anonymous and many recent scholars now believe that none were written by eyewitnesses. (So much for the history lesson).

(Matthew the tax collector)

The main purpose of Matthew is to prove that Jesus Christ is the Messiah. This means the anointed one from God. It is traditionally believed to have been written by Levi, a Jew from Galilee who collected taxes for the Romans, and whose Greek name was Matthew. He was believed to be one of Jesus’s first ‘apostles’ – his close circle of twelve followers or ‘disciples’ – who were ‘sent out’ with the Good News.

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However, Matthew’s account of Jesus’s life was written between 70 and 80AD primarily for Jewish readers. Again, its particular emphasis was to persuade its readers that Jesus really was the Messiah or Christ – the ‘anointed one’ promised by the Old Testament prophets. As a result, many passages in Matthew’s gospel set out to demonstrate that Jesus fulfilled the expectations that Jews had of the Messiah in New Testament times.

This is the intention of the gospel readings we have had for the past couple of weeks, and on to next week. Last week, Maxwell covered the text where Jesus sought affirmation from his disciples that he was indeed the promised Messiah. Unfortunately, Peter was the only one, who after three years travelling together and many signs, recognised and was able to state with confidence, that Jesus was the Son of God. (This one out of twelve response must have been mildly depressing).

(Peter and the keys to heaven)

Peter got the Gold Star for the right answer, the keys to the kingdom of heaven, but, true to form, he blew it shortly afterwards.

Poor Peter. Poor disciples. They must have been absolutely buzzing about the fact that Jesus had just acknowledged himself as their long-awaited Messiah, when suddenly, the ground shifted under their feet, but not as they might have expected. Unfortunately, Jesus doesn’t give them, and especially Peter, any time or room for jubilation. “From that time on,” Jesus starts to explain that the Messiah would not be embraced but rejected, not crowned but executed, not empowered by might but weakened by affliction. What a disappointment this must have been, what a baffling shift in expectations. Clearly, this is not what Peter had imagined when he dared to speak the truth about Jesus’ identity.

(Jesus angry with Peter)

Obviously pretty devastated by Jesus’ statements, Peter begins to seek to correct him about the nature and scope of his mission. “Listen, Jesus, this cannot be what God intends for you. There must be a different way. This is not what our deliverer ought to do. Suffering and dying is what **we** have all endured, prophet and ordinary person alike. You are supposed to be different. You are supposed to save us from all our enemies!” Jesus’ reproach is anything but subtle: “Get behind me, Satan!” Peter thus moves from the heights of recognition to the depths of rejection. What can this mean? Why is Peter now acting like the great deceiver?

It is precisely because Peter’s words are drawing Jesus away from the divinely ordained path that moves from suffering to the cross, from torture to shame. Jesus didn’t actively want that situation, but he was following a path of obedience to the understanding he had of God’s larger mission for him. Peter’s outburst was one of love, but Jesus knew that acting in a way that would be easy, would not achieve what his mission was intended to be.

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We can all probably identify with the temptation to take the easier path, the one of least resistance, instead of persisting with challenges and possible threats to either our lifestyle, or even our life. However, this tough and dangerous path is the one upon which any of Jesus’ followers must tread. What does it look like to follow the Messiah, the anointed of God?

(The path of crosses)

That path is lined with crosses and paved with Jesus’ passion. This is a matter of life and death for his followers as much as it is for Jesus. And yet we learn that this suffering, this crucified experience is not all that there will be. Jesus **will** return and bring justice in his wake. Such justice is not merely the paying off of old debts or the settling of bitter scores. Instead, this judgment is a promise of deliverance.

The cross will appear to span finality. The cross will appear to be the end of the story for us all. But the promise Jesus makes here, and the promises God has made from the beginning assure a different future, a future in which justice blooms, a future in which the hungry are fed and the imprisoned are comforted.

(Jesus in his splendour)

‘The Son of Man arriving with all the splendour of his Father’ occurs in great and small ways in our lives already, even if we don’t recognise that except in hindsight. That promise, assured by God’s Messiah, drives us into a hopeful future even when our present troubles are engulfing us. After all, Jesus walked this path before us. Jesus knew too well about rejection and loathing. He has gone before us. Now, **we** can follow him in faith. Remember, speaking the words “Jesus is the Messiah” requires only the exertion of the mind, but *living* those words is a declaration that we are willing to walk that path. It’s up to us at we do about that.

Amen.