St Peter the Fisherman – Whitianga
Sunday October 1st

Theme: (Matthew 21 – Jesus’ authority)

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*

 (Blank slide)

As soon as I started reading the various theological Commentaries about today’s Gospel text I was transported back to my life in late 1960’s London where if one hadn’t watched Monty Python’s Flying Circus on Thursday night, BBC2, one was pretty well excluded from the ensuing work conversations and general verbal mayhem around the office.

If your life passed by Monty Python without contact, then you have been deprived of some of the most brilliant and completely maniacal comedy England has ever produced. If you shared my world then you will be sitting here remembering The Dead Parrot sketch, the competition for who had the poorest most deprived accommodation in their upbring, and most of all – The Spanish Inquisition.

(video clip)

(Blank slide)

The story of Jesus’ initial encounter with the most powerful leaders in Jerusalem follows soon after his triumphal entry to that city, followed by his fairly brutal cleansing and occupation of the temple.

It is clear from most of Matthew’s writing that all sorts of people ask Jesus questions, some for understanding, some to try to trap him, some self-serving; and given the persistence of the Jewish Leaders, sometimes Jesus might have felt he was an early victim of that yet to arrive Inquisition. Both the questions and Jesus’ answers are striking. John the Baptist and Pilate ask questions about Jesus’ identity; John asks if he is in fact the one they have been waiting for and Pilate asks if he is the king of the Jews. The Pharisees, Scribes, Sadducees, chief priests and elders asked questions to try to trap Jesus; for signs or proof of him being the Messiah; about divorce, taxes, resurrection, and the role of the commandments. Today, just after Jesus had finally arrived in Jerusalem, their question was, “by what authority are you doing these things?”

The disciples also constantly asked him questions; who is the greatest among us?; what good deed do we have to do to receive eternal life?; and for a sign concerning Jesus’ coming at the end of the age. And for every question someone else following Jesus asked, Peter would ask another; “How often must I forgive?” “We left everything for you, what do we get?”.

These questions are all revealing and with only a couple of exceptions, are all self-serving. Those who ask Jesus questions want to trap him, or impress him, or get something from him. And to every pointed question Jesus offers an equally pointed answer, which reveals truth about the Kingdom, the King, and the Kingdom’s subjects.

(Jesus and Jewish leaders)

Today, Jesus responds to the question put to him with a question of his own, and another parable to illustrate it. His question reverses the trap which the chief priests and elders are trying to set for Jesus. His accusers refuse to answer Jesus in case it incriminates them in the eyes of the crowds. They know that a denial of the legitimacy of John’s baptism will not play well with the crowds, whose support they need. On the other hand, if they affirm that John’s baptism actions came from heaven, he will ask them why they did not believe him.

Their answer — “we don’t know” — is only two words long in the Greek; we can imagine these words being delivered under their breath. They have lost.

So, Jesus, in turn, doesn’t answer **their** question about **his** authority either, but he does tell them a parable.

A comparison of two sons. One who says he will do what his father asks, but doesn’t, one who says he won’t, but does. So, today we are asked the same question, *Which am I*?

Am I the child who presents as obedient while actually running around being anything but, or am I the child who to all appearances is the disobedient “black sheep” but in the end does what is needed? Which am I? Which are you?

There is an accusation here — are we among those who claim to obey the Father and observe the requirements of God’s Law but in reality, fail to do so. Is this who we are? There is also a reversal of expectations in the parable — those who seem to have failed to live in the right way, will still be given entry to the kingdom of heaven first. Rather like last week’s workers in the vineyard, where the last ones hired became the first to be rewarded.

After their “through gritted teeth” response to Jesus’ question, he returns accusation for accusation, “For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; yet even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”

Jesus’ parable is, in the end, a challenge to us as well as to the Jewish leaders trying to trap him. It asks us how we will respond to the truth of the gospel — will we accept the teachings and messages we are given, and believe, or not? Will we be the child who pretends obedience, and just gives it lip service, or the one who turns around his or her life, and lives by Jesus’ hopes for us?

If we are to thrive as followers of God -

(list)

 we must *love as Jesus taught us to love*,

we must *forgive as Jesus taught us to forgive*,

we must *honour the truth as Jesus taught us to honour the truth,*

we must be *salt and light as Jesus taught us to be salt and light,*

we must *have compassion as He taught us to have compassion*,

we must *be generous as He taught us to be generous,*

we *must sacrifice as He taught us to sacrifice*,

we *must endure persecution as He taught us to endure persecution*.

***We******must******submit******to******the******authority******of******Jesus****.*

Pretending to be a follower of God doesn’t get someone one step closer to heaven. Claiming to be a Christian won’t get one letter of a name written in the book of life. It isn’t possible to fake our way into heaven. Jesus is again emphasising that a faith which does not result in behavioural change that lives out his message is not true faith.

The person who says “Yes!” but does “No!” is not going to make it. It doesn’t matter to God **when** we got it and truly behaved as God asks, it just matters that before we are called, we did. Given that we don’t know **when** that will be, it’s probably a good idea to make sure we are already living and behaving as God expects.

Amen.