

Week 9b St Matthew's Hastings 2024.

Tena kotu katoa. What a privilege and unexpected surprise it is for me to stand before you once again today, after a break of 28 years. It remains to be seen if it's been a good idea for all of you. We have all moved on. The young boys who accompanied Hilary and I to the parish in 1986, Andrew and Stephen are now both married and are parents to our 5 grandchildren. Andrew works for the Ministry of Justice and Stephen is chaplain to Waikato Dio. We have all moved on. But what of you the parishioners of greater Hastings?

Have you moved on. Are you fully alive, vibrant? Do you look forward to each new day? Are you excited by what lies ahead? Is your life an apparent procession of endless opportunities? What are you on!

Today's Gospel reading is another phase in Jesus ongoing controversy with the Pharisees, a controversy which is becoming increasingly more demanding. Here the newness of the kingdom is found in the gift of life.

Once again Jesus' disciples are accused of breaking the Law, plucking heads of grain to eat while walking through a field. In fact, the disciples' interpretation of the law is quite orthodox, but does not meet the highly rigorous standards of the Pharisees. In answer to their criticism Jesus reminds them of an incident in the life of King David, someone highly respected by all the Jewish people. Besieged by King Saul, David's companions entered the

house of God and ate the bread of the priests' laid out before the altar. The message is clear. When it comes to matters of life and death, the needs of the living take priority over ritual prohibitions. The hunger of David and his companions reflects a need in which human life is put in jeopardy. All laws whether of man or God take second place to the needs of living beings. This is an extraordinary proclamation of freedom. The Pharisees are so anxious not to transgress that they have lost sight of the real purpose of the commandments. The purpose of the Torah is to bring life, but when it is wrongly interpreted, it becomes an instrument of evil and the bearer of death.

This is not a criticism which Christians can smugly address to the Jews and feel totally exonerated themselves. The Thirty Years War, fought throughout western Europe between 1618- 1648 was on a par with the First World War for its destructiveness and sense of despair it gave to the people of Europe. And the spark for this bloody conflict was the religious differences between Catholics and Protestants. Here Christians fought bitterly with one another over what it meant to be a real Christian. The purpose of Christianity, the teaching of Jesus in today's Gospel reading, is that the service of God is life-giving. If it is not, then something is radically wrong.

Today is also Te Pouhere Sunday, the day Anglicans in this land celebrate our life as a three Tikanga church, Maori, Pakeha and Pasifika. We have been enriched as kiwis by our interaction with each other on more equal terms: borrowing language, customs and traditions from each

other. My children and grandchildren move more freely in this new environment than I, raised in a very different cultural setting in this land we are proud to call Aotearoa New Zealand. When I travel overseas and mingle with others of other nations' I know that I am different, I don't fit in their world and I thank God that I live in this land. This is where I fit, it is here that I am most alive.

For a human being, simply to be alive is a glorious thing. Life is a gift, not only from our parents; life is a gift from above, from the God who gives all that is good, everything that is perfect. The gift of life is a sharing in God who is life. You live because God lives in you.

More. You share life with so much else on earth: with stone and star, with sea and sand, fern and forest. With the birds of the air, and the stock in the paddocks, and the fish of the sea, you can see and hear and touch and taste and smell. But what makes you human and special is that you share two of God's precious perfections: you have the power to know, and you have the freedom to love. You are someone; you are a person; you are like God.

That is why human life is so sacred, for human life mirrors divine life as no other life can. That's why the intelligent Christian is so sensitive to life at its dawning and life in its twilight, to the rights of children and the dignity of the age worn. All human life is sacred. If it is to be taken at all, in Ukraine or in the Gulf of Arabia, it must be taken with reluctance, with a stifled cry of pain, with a horrifying realisation that someone unrepeatable is being destroyed,

that with his or her death, I myself am somehow diminished - and God is not glorified.

But in the Christian scheme of things, you are not genuinely alive simply because you're not medically dead. Every dictator from Herod to Hitler to Putin has had purpose and passion. Sinners can be astonishingly alive especially in their sin. But the human reflection of the divine life must include knowledge and love; the potential must be dynamised.

The human spirit is incurably curious, will never cease to wonder. And so, the geneticist wants to play with the chromosomes of plants and animals, the physicist will blast a rocket to Venus; a Toynbee will reconstruct the past, AI challenges our understanding of what it is to be human, as a child will run his fingers lazily through grass and water; the young will reach for reality through drugs, and all will seek in film the meaning of being human. For this is the life of embodied spirit, a constant quest for the real.

But knowledge can destroy and unite. It can kill and create, cause compassion and breed envy, hatred and war. Our knowledge, our awareness, reflects the mind of God when its energies are directed to compassion and creativity, to peace, to oneness, to love. For the God I seek to reflect is the God in whom understanding and love are one. Hence Jesus eats with the outcasts, heals wherever he has the opportunity, and challenges the formal religion of his day. Here is authentic human life, because it images God's own life. And all of us both Christians and non-Christians

recognise this when we see it in Te Whiti of Parihaka, or Martin Luther King, or Nelson Mandela.

This 'good life' where knowing leads to loving, suggests the final facet of being like God, and that's eternal life. It's not easy to say when the good life becomes eternal life. Eternal life is to love God and Jesus, to love every human being with a love born of God's grace. Eternal life does not begin with death. Eternal life is a specially intimate presence, where God within me is the source of my activity, transforms my thinking, transfuses my freedom - in a genuine sense, is my life.

This is the mystery of grace, persons fused in love. God offering Godself to me, communicating his life to me, demanding from me love and faithfulness. And I offer myself to God, am shaped by Christ's grace, and so share in the secret life of God.

This life in Christ is not easy to grasp. It may well be that you can understand it only by living it. 1600 years ago, Augustine of Africa wrote:

Give me someone who loves, and he will understand what I am trying to say. Give me someone whose heart yearns, who is hungry, who feels the loneliness of this exile...give me such a one, and he will understand what I am trying to say. But if I must explain myself to ice-cold indifference, he will not understand.

Life in all its fullness. Are you surprised that the committed Christian sees life, touches life, lives life with awe and

wonder, in fear and trembling? If God's glory is you, you
alive, dare you glory in less than life, in loss of life, in
death?