

Now What? We look out.

Today, is a most practical sermon to conclude “What’s next” series.

I want to give us all some direction forward as a church, esp. as Advent and Xmas are on the horizon. This is also a message that I hope to see played out over the next few weeks and months.

Remember, a couple of weeks ago I asked those gathered to look at the pews and seats around them. I said the following, *“Now as we look around this morning, we are aware that this place is not as full as it was. In fact, you might be thinking, “oh my, look at all these empty seats!”*

To that, I say “fantastic”. In fact, I want that phrase, “Look at all those empty seats” to become our unofficial (or should be official?) vision for this new season that The Lord is leading us on. Where some may see an empty seat, I see a seat that is waiting. Where some may see a reminder of what has been, I see a promise of what is to come.”

So today, I want to draw our gaze back to the seats waiting to be filled.

I also wanted to leave you with one final image to guide us, this morning.

The trouble is, as I sat in my writing spot, early Monday morning, I could not actually think of one.

I looked around for inspiration.

Maybe the coffee cup, empty but waiting to be filled?

How about the glass of water, in front of me; clean, pure, refreshing.

What about the empty chair opposite me?

It could be the noise and laughter of the people around me?

I was at a loss creatively; until I realised that the answer was before me the whole time. In fact, I was not looking for one image, but two!

Two images that does not require you to think back, look on the screen, or endure nerdy comments about Lego.

Two images that are familiar to us all; but more on that in a moment.

I asked, 2 weeks ago, “What’s next?”, the answer was, “We pause”

We have reflected on the fact that Communion allows us to pause, and in doing so, we turn our backs on human sources of hope and look to Jesus. We turn our backs on politicians and their talk of peace, and we look to the Prince of Peace.

I asked, last week, “What’s next?” The answer was, “We look around”

We reflected on the fact that, when we come to Communion we look around, and we realise that Jesus says that we are enough. We come as we are, feeling as we feel, bringing all we are. We looked around this place and were reminded what we have to build with. The pieces are laid out, and we have enough to build with.

So, this week, the final answer to “*What’s next?*” is “We look out”.

The images, I mentioned a moment ago are ones that we see each week, here in this whare karakia- this church. One is the empty seats- which I mentioned at the start of my message. Empty seats that are waiting to be sat on. Empty seats that speak to me about invitation and welcome; community and the future.

The next image is the other is the Communion laid out before us.

Be it Communion taken in this format, as we do; or in other ways that you have taken- I want us to look beyond the silver ware and look to the Bread and the wine and Juice.

Communion symbolises the foundation of our faith. The death and resurrection of Jesus. Messiah, Saviour, King and he who calls us to live as he did.

We need a foundation on which to stand; because we need to remember where we stand.

We stand, as people of faith on a foundation built on restoration, forgiveness, love, justice, hope, repentance, and a commitment to, in the words of Paul in Philippians, *“conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ”*

Communion, is a powerful symbol of that foundation, isn't it? Note that I said symbol; the minute the symbol, or the elements used take the place of what is being symbolised we start seeing culture smother Christ- if we are not careful.

So, while being a symbol, Communion is also a tangible act that is rich in meaning; and an act that speaks to our past, present, and future.

For while, our personal beliefs and ideologies are all different, and while our approach to theology is varied, along with our church experience; we all gather for communion.

Communion cuts through all the culture, experiences- both good and bad, and reminds us that the heart and foundation of our faith is the direct access to God; the direct access made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In communion, there is no place for anything that hinders or limits that direct access to God that is symbolised when we all share communion.

There is also something else that occurs, that is just as deeply symbolic as the taking the bread, the wine or the juice.

That is, when we have received communion, we turn around and leave it behind us. We, in one sense, having turned our back on the world to acknowledge the kingship of Jesus, now turn to the face the world looking out with hope, peace, joy, love and the assurance that comes from following Jesus's footsteps.

We look out, don't we?

We look out to the day and week ahead.

We look out to the future.

We look out and ask,

“So, how do we proclaim the Gospel of Christ?”

“So, how do we share the gift and deep symbolism of communion with others?”

“So, how do we share the message of restoration and reconciliation

Well, we start close to home.

Let's be honest, we all know people who “used to go to church” and no longer attend anywhere. They may have past hurts or grievances; they may have been the source of those hurts, or they may have been hurt by others.

Their faith may still be strong, or it may be slightly battered and bruised. They may be ashamed, or they may be angry.

They may need to encounter Jesus afresh.

They may simply need to sit in a safe space, or even the back row of a church.

You know what we do, we simply and prayerfully, invite them to come and join you here, on a Sunday.

We invite someone, we know, to church. Not church, as in come and be an “Anglican” or come and experience church culture; but come and join with other people who are searching for peace, hope, and meaning.

Come and join us as we gather for communion, not culture.

We invite them to come and share communion- the anchor we all share.

We are not inviting them to merely a “church service”, but something that is as a gateway to a community.

We are inviting them to “come home”, not so much to us- but to Jesus.

This can be easier said than done, and often it is easier to invite someone to an “event” as opposed to a regular Sunday Service.

So, this Advent, our Advent journey theme will be *“Come home”*- again, not to us, but Jesus.

Come and reencounter Christ's Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love with us. We will also be running, for the first time, The Waiwhetu Community Carol's on December 16, as well as offering our *Silent Night* reflective time over the evenings of the 23rd and 24th.

We then gather for Christmas Day together, and it is my deep prayer that they will continue to journey with us- not for the sake of filling the empty seats with church goers, but to fill those seats with people who want to experience that direct access to God, that we all experience each week.

To fill those seats with people who long to reconnect, to find restoration; to find healing; and to find God's love again.

To fill those seats with people, who long to be at home with Christ again.

Now this seems like rather early notice, but I wanted to give us all time to pray about who we will invite. This gives us time to reflect on how we might start talking with them; and it gives us time to prepare ourselves to invite them.

It gives us time to keep looking out.

Amen