

Sunday 4th October

Isaiah 5:1-7; Philippians 3:4-14; Matthew 21:33-46

Ki te ingoa o te Matua, o te Tamaiti, ko te Wairua Tapu.

In the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Amine.

It's been about a month since we've been in our "new - old" space. Perhaps you're beginning to get used to it. Perhaps it still feels very different. Perhaps you're still working through where it sits for you. For some, it can be daunting returning to a space you once knew to be a particular way. For others, entering into a "new" space can feel invigorating and full of opportunity. It's been great to start this new season, literally in the new season of Spring.

Rev Karl has taken us on a little journey of adapting to this space the last few weeks:

We pause - to take a big breath, reflect and sit in this place after such a significant event.

We look around - and see and acknowledge all the "pieces" we have available to us in this next chapter at this present moment.

We look out - to those beyond this place, and perhaps connected to us, the opportunity to connect with Jesus and all that our faith calls and compels us to be and do.

A number of folks, including previous parishioners, other Christian brothers and sisters, and even community members who know how important my faith is to me, have asked me, "How was the first service?" "What's it like being back in "the church"?" And if I'm being honest, personally, it's all been a bit of a blur. I have continued to reflect on the 8+ years journey - and that's not even inclusive of the discussions leading up to where we've been. My whole 6 years as the previous People's Warden, was navigating our church community outside these particular "four walls" and I reflect on that season being not too dissimilar to a period of 'walking in the wilderness.' It was challenging, it really pushed us, we grew a lot in numerous ways. At times we learnt things the hard way, and in other moments, we really relished in the blessings of our creator - in ways we possibly could not have imagined.

Throughout that time, there's been an image - and a bit of a modern proverb that's become popular in community circles that has really stuck with me, and developed as we've gotten on: **"When you have more than you need, build a longer table, not a higher fence."**

Throughout that time of the "wilderness," not only have we experienced the benefit of others sharing a longer table with us, but we've been able to find ways to build a longer table within the limitations we have had, such as by utilising our hall and fellowship area in unique ways; in leaning into the strengths and passions of our church members and whanau; in looking out and building relationships with those in our wider community, etc. It's kinda exciting to think - with this new-old space, what does it look like for us to keep building a longer table?

This modern proverb stuck out to me as I was going through the readings, because in some ways it also feels a bit like a warning of what those higher fences may look like... And sometimes those fences aren't quite what we may have imagined they might be - and that in itself can be rather confronting.

I must admit, looking at these readings I was rather daunted by them. They're a bit heavy, and challenging, and perhaps even a bit grim. But I also think they struck a chord in me, because when it hits deep it is confronting, and that can be a bit uncomfortable.

I'm someone who is a big fan of preparation - I feel like you can often save yourself a lot of frustration and agony, if you put in some good effort in preparing. The reality is, that sometimes that preparation can be for naught - as our Isaiah reading alludes to:

"My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.

He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines;

he built a watch-tower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it;

he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes."

As we move forward with Advent around the corner, and the opportunities to utilise this space more, and as Karl previously has mentioned - encouraging and inviting those to "come home" there will still be hiccups and challenges, particularly as we step out in faith.

If we thought the old testament reading today was hard hitting, the Gospel is just as confronting, if not more so (from verse 42 onwards):

"Jesus said to them...."The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone...

"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. ⁴⁴ Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them."

Going back to that modern proverb, and reflecting on our own journey - I actually think over the years we've made some good inroads with making the 'table longer' and we're beginning to see the fruits of that ministry and mahi - and part of our challenge will be how do we continue to do so, and what is it that God calls us to - to keep honestly and faithfully showing up and leaning into our calling.

Sometimes it can be harder to see when we're leaning into fear and perhaps unintentionally or at times intentionally building up the fences, particularly when we've got something that feels incredibly precious that we're wanting to protect and conserve. I think there's a lot to be said about being vigilant - about not getting too complacent or taking things for granted.

Most of you will be well aware that the past year I have been navigating a new, pretty public facing job. Even in my personal life I have been wrestling with this idea of building a longer table, rather than putting up a higher fence. What's been most interesting to me, is how sometimes in holding the things that matter the most, those moments of building a longer table and putting up a higher fence can look rather similar; or what I think may be one thing, may be experienced differently by another.

So, how do I ensure I keep myself from falling into the trap of the Pharisees? How do we as a church whanau, stay focused to ensure we continue to relish in the kingdom of God and continue to cultivate, nourish and harvest the fruits?

I pivot back to those three things that Rev Karl has shared over the last few weeks - because I don't think they are things that are only relevant in the first few weeks of being in this space, but well beyond - good things that help us stay on track and focused on building a longer, and hopefully, even a stronger table.

It is important for us to find moments **to pause** and reflect and soak in what is and has been. It is important for us **to look around** and also celebrate what we have and look at the opportunities ahead. It is important **to keep looking out**, to connect with our wider community and strengthen our relationship with our creator God.

Philippians 4:7 onwards addresses where our focus needs to remain - with Christ:

“But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.

I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ...

But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,

I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.’

As we relish this continued season of spring - it feels timely when we have done some preparation, we may have planted some things, and we keep things moving (such as watering, and keeping an eye on any weeds), as we await for greater things to emerge and grow.

Let us pray (w a Michael Leunig prayer):

Dear God,

We celebrate spring's returning and the rejuvenation of the natural world.

Let us be moved by this vast and gentle insistence that goodness shall return,

That warmth and life shall succeed, and help us to understand our place within this miracle.

Let us see that as a bird that now builds its nest, bravely, with bits and pieces,
so we must build human faith.

It is our simple duty; it is the highest art;

it is our natural and vital role within the miracle of spring: the creation of faith.

Amen.