

Compassion - the Mark of the Saints 7 November 2021

All Saints Sunday

Reading: John 11:32-44

It's wonderful to be able to welcome William into the family of God today. It's repeat business because not all that long ago we welcomed Matthew in baptism as well.

I know both William and Matthew have been born into a loving, encouraging family and they will have so many opportunities as they grow up. One of the very best things we can encourage in our kids is compassion. Human nature at its very best is when we discover compassion in ourselves and in others.

In today's gospel Bible reading we see the compassion of Jesus. It's a very real human scene. Jesus is at the funeral of a friend, a close friend. By the time he arrives on the scene, Lazarus has been dead for four days. We see Jesus' compassion in the shortest verse in the whole Bible. It is just three words: "and Jesus wept." Three times John tells us how upset Jesus is. To have compassion means to literally feel with, com passion. It is very like empathy.

At the moment in our COVID season we feel so much compassion for those who suffer. Our own parish secretary Shyuan has both her mother and father in a hospital in Malaysia with COVID. We like to complain about our government and our health system, but she got the news on Friday that the hospital hasn't been feeding her parents due to a breakdown in infrastructure. They found a cousin to go and take them food. We feel for her and all those like her in our world.

Today is a great day to get baptized because it's All Saints Sunday. Today we give thanks for all those who have been saints.

I'm always amazed by the wisdom that children have. I was doing a children's talk one All Saints' Sunday and I asked the kids I had seated before me, "What's a saint?" I wasn't expecting the answer that came. One little girl put up her hand. "A saint," she said, "is like a stained-glass window. They let the glory of God shine through them" I don't know if an adult had primed her beforehand. But what a really good definition. "A saint is like a stained-glass window. They let the glory of God shine through them." The Anglican church has a calendar of saints. These are people we remember each day for the way they have allowed the glory of God to shine through them. As it happens, I'm on a committee to look at the process for deciding saints. We have our own calendar of saints unique to this country. We do share lots of saints with the universal church (like St Luke, the patron saint of this church) but we are also free to have local people.

Yesterday the church remembered one such local person Te Whiti o Rongomai.

Te Whiti was one of the most remarkable figures of the nineteenth century. About the same time that this little church was built he provided leadership to his people and established a model community at Parihaka on the fertile plains beside Mount Taranaki. The village had schools, running water, sanitation, roads, health care and even gas lights. Sixty years before Mahatma Gandhi in India, he trained his people in non-violent resistance. Te Whiti was doing it too. Te Whiti was a Christian and had a deep and wide-ranging knowledge of the Bible. In fact, he knew it so well he could recite it off by heart.

Until 1877, the government ignored the fact that Māori had returned to live on land that had been officially confiscated. Settler pressure mounted however for the acquisition of these fertile lands. Te Whiti was an outstanding orator, and by the strength of his mana he forged his people into a cohesive and unified community. Many from other tribes joined them. The inevitable confrontation developed. When the troops reached Parihaka at 7.15am on 5 November 1881, they found the fences pulled down to allow them in and they were offered bread. The only thing in their way was a group of 200 children singing songs. When Cabinet Minister Bryce read the Riot Act and called on the Māori to disperse, he was met with silence. When the arresting party entered, they cleared a way for them. Te Whiti and other leaders walked with dignity into captivity. Te Whiti and his family and

other leaders were imprisoned and taken to the South Island. Even spending a time without trial in Addington prison just a few miles from here. Throughout all this time, Te Whiti kept his faith and the faith of the other prisoners by reciting the Bible and praying. He was not allowed a Bible of his own.

Nor did he grow bitter. Much later in his life, when asked if it were true that he had predicted that one day all Pakeha would be swept into the sea, he dismissed the idea angrily:

What I said and wished to convey was, that the two races should live side by side in peace; the white man to live among us - not we to be subservient to his immoderate greed.

At a time of great difficulty for the Māori people, Te Whiti had compassion both for his people and for Pakeha. He longed for a time when we could live together in peace. His funeral was one of the biggest this country has ever seen.

My prayer then for William today is simple. I pray that he will have a long and wonderful life, full of adventures and opportunity. But I also pray that he will be a person of compassion, like Jesus and, like Te Whiti, I pray that he will have empathy and stand alongside those that suffer.

There is no greater virtue. May we never lack compassion either.