

Reading: Matthew 16:21-28; Romans 12:9-21

It's really tempting to want to escape the winter and many New Zealanders do just that. This last winter Air New Zealand experienced its busiest winter school holidays ever. A record number escaped the New Zealand winter. In the four weeks prior to June 24, 260,000 kiwis traveled to warmer places. Many went to Australia, with Brisbane being the most popular for Cantabrians, while Fiji was the top destination if you lived in Auckland, Napier, or Palmerston North. Mind you, if you live in Palmerston North, who can blame you?

To put 260,000 people in context, that's equivalent to the whole population of Wellington going on holiday in a four-week period.

It's tempting, isn't it, to miss out on winter and go straight to spring? This is the temptation that Peter falls into in our Gospel reading. Coming on the heels of the praise Peter got last week for proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, this week he is faced with the harsh reality. Jesus, the Messiah, must suffer and die before he can be raised again by God. Winter and then the spring.

In his prayers and in his reflection, Jesus has come to the conviction that he must suffer and die, yet he also believes God will prove faithful, that new life will follow his death. In God's way, spring will follow winter.

Rita Snowden was a well-known writer, both in New Zealand and internationally. She spent her working life as a deaconess for the Methodist Church, doing social service work and caring for the poor. She wrote her first book in 1933 and published over 50 more. She was also well known as a broadcaster. In 1975 she was awarded an OBE, and in 1956 she was elected the first Vice President of the Methodist Conference. She wrote a simple sentence I often use at funerals. This sentence sums up our Christian hope so well: *God's world is conceived in hope, love is born anew in every child, spring follows the leaf strewn way of winter, eternal life is found in what we call death.*

This truth is almost too much for Peter to bear. The rock man feels himself reduced to dust. He must discover that spring follows winter.

In the reading from Romans, Paul offers us a guideline for living. These words have become famous after being written on the wall of a Philadelphian church in the 18th century. *Hate what is evil, hold fast to that which is good, love one another. Rejoice in hope, extend hospitality to strangers, do not claim to be wiser than you are. Inasmuch as it depends on you, be at peace with all. Do not overcome evil with evil but overcome evil with good.* My mother-in-law had these words as a poster on her toilet door. I often used to sit and read the poster when I was, well, otherwise engaged. Amongst the more famous lines is one that really stands out for me today as we celebrate Spring, **rejoice in hope**. Spring is God's invitation to us all to rejoice in hope. As the days lengthen, the earth warms, and the ground brings forth new life. All this and more God gives us as a sign that new life follows winter and that we too can be renewed in hope.

I was struck by a story of hope that I read in *Hope for All*, a wee pamphlet put together by the *Hope Project* to celebrate 200 years of Christianity in New Zealand:

There's no nice way to say it - Mike used to beat Penni.

It didn't start that way - when he first met Penni, she thought she'd found someone who really loved her and looked after her - but looking back, they could see how it happened. They had violence in their backgrounds, got married in their late teens and had three children. When Mike began to beat Penni, he'd promise he'd change but he didn't. The cycle Penni had longed to escape was happening in her home.

Then one day something changed. Mike decided to follow Jesus. He told Penni how God was willing to forgive him - and Penni couldn't believe it. She resented what he'd done to her and the children, and felt he needed to be punished, not forgiven.

Penni wanted to make Mike pay for what he had done. She brought people home to ridicule him, but all the time, while she was angry, Mike was becoming a better person.

A year later something snapped in Penni. She even went so far as to hold her gun up to Mike's head. She left for her mother's house. All this time Mike was faithful. He had stopped smoking drugs and was providing well for the children. As unfair as it seems she realized God loved him enough to forgive him.

Eventually though reluctantly, she phoned him. "I want what you have. I want your God."

It wasn't easy at first - there were hurts that needed to be dealt with, but she asked God to give her new love for Mike.

"I don't think I could have done it without God," she said recently.

Thirty years later they are the best of friends and share everything together, including helping families in the same situation, and they are watching their grandchildren grow without the cycle of violence.

Today then God has a message for us. Rejoice in hope in your life. Begin that journey that God takes us all on from winter to spring. We don't need to fear the winter times of our lives, but rather know that just around the corner lies God's promise of spring, and that hope is what we embrace today.

Let us pray...

**God of the Springtime
you renew the earth.
Renew us also in hope,
that all our winters be transformed
into the new life of Spring.
Now and forever. Amen.**