



Ordinary Holiness
Rev Richard Bonifant
Year A, Ordinary 14
Zechariah 9: 9-12,
Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30
5 July 2026

There is a funny thing that has happened to me many times over the years during different youth groups that I have run. It typically occurs when a member of the group has brought someone along for the first time. Normally the new person has been given a chance to settle in before one of the regulars says to them, "You'll never guess what Richard does." And sure enough the newcomer has no idea. Then there is always a degree of mirth as they reveal that I am a priest. Time and again the newcomer is surprised and not quite sure how to make sense of this information. It is at this point that one of the young people pipes up and says something like, "It's ok, he's not a real priest."

I don't entirely like being described in this way, because I am a real priest. However I know what these young people are actually trying to communicate. The fun they are having is to hold up a stereotype and then see what happens when they introduce a conflicting piece of information. The stereotype is the idea of what a priest looks like, and the conflicting information is me. So when they say Richard isn't a real priest, what they are actually saying is that Richard doesn't fit the stereotype. In a strange way it is a compliment. Just not a particularly well communicated one.

If I asked you to think of a holy person, I wonder who you might think about? A saint, a religious leader, a person from history, or maybe someone you've known? What does holiness look like to you? While we might find it hard to articulate an

answer to that question, deep down most of us hold certain ideas about holiness. My thesaurus offers a long list of synonyms that includes words like sanctity, godliness, saintliness, piety, righteousness, purity and sinlessness. While synonyms don't define a word precisely, this list gives us a picture of the characteristics we tend to assign to someone we consider to be holy.

There is a scene in what is arguably the greatest science fiction movie ever made, that subverts our expectations of what a great person might look like. I am speaking of *The Empire Strikes Back*. In the scene, Luke Skywalker has crash landed on a swampy planet and is having a thoroughly miserable time. To make matters worse, an irritating little creature has decided to befriend him and offer all sorts of unwanted assistance. Luke has come to this planet because his late mentor told him to seek out a great spiritual teacher called Yoda. What Luke fails to realise is that the teacher he is searching for is actually the creature who has been frustrating him. Luke's preconceptions about what a great teacher should look like completely clouds his ability to recognise that he is already in the presence of greatness.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus is making a similar complaint. He is frustrated by the inability of people around him to recognise holiness when it is standing right in front of them. He points first to John the Baptist, a genuine ascetic who wore animal skins and lived on locusts and wild honey. Asceticism, the practice of self-denial, has long been associated with holiness across many religious traditions. The Buddha famously reduced his meals to a single grain of rice a day. Many of the great saints of the Christian tradition were identified as holy precisely because of the rigour of their self-discipline. And yet, Jesus notes, even John with all his self-denial was not accepted as a holy person by those around him.

Jesus then turns to himself, and the contrast could hardly be more striking. Jesus was not someone who practiced intense self-denial. He was just the opposite. Where John abstained from regular meals, Jesus embraced them. Jesus ate and drank with anyone and everyone, and clearly enjoyed doing so. Over and over in the Gospels we find Jesus sitting down to share meals, often with people who had been pushed to the edges of society.

Eating and drinking with outcasts, does that sound like the behaviour of a saintly, pious, Godly person? For many who encountered Jesus it did not. The truth of Jesus is that holiness was not located in being aloof, or appearing to be pious or ethereal in some way. Jesus located holiness in the nitty gritty, day to day experience of genuine human relationship. Jesus showed us that holiness is found in moments when we are fully living as the people God created us to be. To put that another way, it is when we are being most fully ourselves, including the messy parts of who we are, that truly embody and share God's presence.

This week marks the 40th anniversary of homosexual law reform in Aotearoa New Zealand. That milestone is worth reflecting on. Reforming the prejudiced laws in this country was a moment when our society began, however imperfectly, to recognise the holiness and dignity of people it had previously excluded and criminalised. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual New Zealanders did not suddenly become worthy of receiving their basic human rights in 1986. What changed was the choice to move away from the dehumanising choices of previous generations and towards affirming the basic, fundamental holiness of those who had been treated as less than that. The law reform was not simply a political event. For us today it is a reminder of a society slowly learning to find the divine spark in people it had been taught to overlook. And that is worth remembering and celebrating.

But to know that history is to remember the challenge of it. Because homosexual law reform was not an end to itself and shouldn't be remembered as such. Because there are others in our community who continue to be treated as less than human, less than holy. Two of our recent billboards have attempted to speak for two of those groups, our transgender community, and our homeless whanau.

The theology behind those billboards is that we are all made in God's image. Each one of us reveals something of God's greater reality. The challenge to us is to treat all other human beings as if we actually believe that to be true. Amen.