



Bishop Ross Bay Confirmation Service

Easter 4

Acts 2:42-47

John 10:1-10

30 April 2023

A visit long planned for these confirmations has ended up falling providentially just before Helen concludes her ministry as your Vicar. So I wish to take this opportunity to extend my personal thanks to you, Helen, for your work **these past nine years**. I'm not too sure where that time has run away to as it seems like no time since we were welcoming you. I am very grateful for all you have done **during this time**, and I wish you and Stephen God's blessing as you prepare for new adventures, some of which are very joyous and exciting for you as a family.

Warm greetings once again to those who come to be confirmed and to renew their faith today. I very much **enjoyed the chance to meet with you at yesterday's retreat day** and to find out a little about you and the ways in which God has called you to this moment.

It was good to hear of the different reasons why you are part **of life at St Matthew's**. Some are family, some are historical, some are very intentional. But a common theme that I heard was about being held here by a church community that has included you, given you a place, and nurtured your faith.

Today's Easter season Scriptures have offered us a wonderful confirmation gift in the passage from Acts 2. In it we read a slice of the life of the very new Jerusalem church as it became established and grew. We heard of a commitment to worship, a sense of awe at the work of God among them, a care for one another, and a thankfulness of heart.

It is very easy to idealise that picture, and I could have retired a long time ago if I had a dollar for every time someone has said to me over the years that we just have to get back to how the New Testament church was. People forget about the politics that complicated the distribution of food to those in need and which led to the appointment of the first deacons. They forget about how not everyone actually did sell everything they had but gave the impression of having done so in order to maintain a self-righteous appearance about it. And in fact nothing more is said about this radical church economy beyond the first Jerusalem group, so presumably it wasn't sustained for long. People forget the struggle for Gentiles to find a place as equals in a Jewish-dominated church where it was hard to delineate theological rationale from inherited racist attitudes. It was **this that led to the church's first synod, that brought some compromise to calm the storm, but could not resolve the underlying attitudes that drove the behaviour.**

So let's not beat ourselves up with an imagined utopia of Christian life in Jerusalem sometime around 30CE with its phenomenal daily growth and think we are struggling along by comparison as we navigate our way through the many disagreements and differences within the church as a whole and within our local congregations, our own debates on inclusion and the use of resources.

Nevertheless I think the writer of Acts deliberately idealises things to point us towards some of the marks of the life of the Church that lie at the heart of things when we are at our best, things that we should aspire to, as we make faith in 21st century Aotearoa New Zealand and seek to be faithful to the Way of Christ in our time and in our context. And much of what is promised at confirmation and renewal has its source in these ideals.

This wonderful phrase about the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers speaks of the worship life of the gathered community and I think is deliberately set before everything else to help us understand just how primary what we do together here is.

Anglicans are a people who learn about our faith first and foremost through our worship. We are not taught into faith, we pray our way there and are sustained in our faith through the corporate worship life of the church. It is hard to hold to Christian faith in isolation and almost impossible to grow in this faith on our own.

And in fact the way we grow is not because we have formed an idealised church life, but because it is messy and full of disputes and taking place in contexts of incredible challenge, something I know has been even more real here in recent months than usual.

This community life, sustained by God through our worship is a place to belong, a place for the mutual exchange of love and care, a place where we learn about forgiveness for there can be much to forgive and for which to be forgiven, a place

that inspires us in our quest for peace and justice as followers of Jesus Christ. What we find here, what we learn here, what we gain from one another here, flows beyond these doors and walls as we carry it with us into the many spheres of life where we belong. The gentle, loving reign of God becomes real for others through us.

All of that is going to be said in the promises of confirmation and renewal – things said explicitly by 5 people today as they commit themselves to this, but no less true for the rest of us who are also pilgrims on the way with Christ here. These things speak of the way in which the work we do in God's name should be undertaken so that it reflects the reign of God, the presence of the divine.

Wherever we find ourselves and in whatever we do, we seek to inculcate a spirit of forgiveness, to act in a way that expresses and encourages love for neighbour, that creates an outcome of peace and justice, and that recognises and accepts that there may be personal cost along the way, especially when these things call us to offer the challenge that leads to change.

These things drawn together give us hope and confidence that through us, the church, the good news of Christ is being made known. And its source is here, in this communal life whose worship helps us to draw on the well-spring of life, God's very self.