

*A sermon preached by Bishop Ross Bay and available for broadcast in online worship on Sunday 17 October 2021. The gospel passage is Mark 10:35-45.*

E ngā mana, e ngā reo, e ngā hau e whā, tēnā koutou katoa.

Greetings to you all in ministry units around the Diocese as most of us continue to gather in virtual ways for corporate worship. I am glad to join you to offer this sermon today, conscious of the long haul that this lockdown is creating for us. Thank you for persevering and for continuing to support one another in all sorts of ways, including by being together in worship. We are reading from Hebrews on Sunday mornings at present and I am mindful of a verse in chapter 10 which in the face of hardship reminds believers not to neglect gathering together and encouragement of one another.

I extend special thanks to clergy and leaders in your worshipping communities who are working hard to make that possible, so please encourage them and support their efforts for you. In all things, we seek to continue to glorify God in our lives.

Vaccination is the issue on everyone's lips. As I write this sermon, the country is preparing for a Super Saturday of vaccinations and even holding a "Vax-a-thon" to go alongside it which is a throw back to my childhood. Recording ahead means that, unlike normal preaching, I won't be able to see how that has gone and add in any quick comments.

There is no question that the vaccination programme is now the major strategy for moving our nation to a point where we can adjust to living with Covid-19 as part of our ongoing reality. At the moment, for Aucklanders especially, there is a big incentive to cooperate with that because it gives us some hope of light ahead that our lives can regain some normality, and that more people can go back to work on full pay, and that the businesses that employ them will still be there.

It's not as simple as it sounds, because across the country we have vaccine-averse and vaccine-hesitant people, along with those who for a variety of reasons are struggling to access a vaccination or are experiencing exclusion from the programme.

The best advice we are being given to help reach this final group is to work personally with them. It's a little bit like the best approach to sharing our faith. It is not to stand on a platform and preach to strangers, nor to constantly convey messages designed to scare people, but to sit down quietly with another and explain why this is important to me and answer the questions the other may have in a spirit of trust and care.

Times like these do bring out the best and worst in people. The journey Jesus made to Jerusalem in the final weeks of his life did that. There is a whole series of moments where disciples don't quite get what Jesus is trying to tell them, but they realise it is a critical time, and the stress of it means they don't always do the right thing. We read today of the request of James and John, the other disciples' response to it, and Jesus' advice to them about a different way to approach it all.

James and John wanted places of honour and importance, and the other disciples became jealous and angry as a result. This in spite of the fact that Jesus has been telling them things like the first

being last, those who act with the trust of small children being greatest, and his own willingness to die for the good of others.

Jostling for position, jealousy, anger, misunderstanding. They are all things we have to strive to overcome as we build community life. It can be very hard to perceive when those things are present, when the stakes are high and people are convinced by their own position and driven by the outcomes they believe are so critical. Sometimes the line is easy to cross and so become the rulers who lord it over others or the great ones who are tyrants over them.

Oh, and before people begin to speculate, I am not making a comment here on the government or any person leading in covid response. I would not want their job for all the communion wafers in Christendom. It's not about judging others, but about looking at ourselves and where our responsibility rests in being part of a community response to this or to any challenge we face together.

So yes, I have been vaccinated, and I did so for a number of reasons. Some of them are self interest, like for the sake of my own health and well-being if I did catch the virus and so that when the time comes I am not excluded from activities in the community. But I also did it because I believe that a wider community good is served by being part of the percentage we need to reach. For me that is about a community ethic of which I believe Jesus speaks when he tells of the great being servants, and the first being a slave to all, and when he speaks of his own destiny being about life-giving service. Jesus gives his life for the salvation of us all, and so sets a path for the kind of spirituality that should mark out the life of the Christian Church and each person in it.

So whether it be vaccinations, or the number of refugees we welcome, or ensuring the homeless have a safe and warm place to sleep, or protecting our planet for the sake of the generations who come after us, as followers of Jesus Christ, the one who came not to be served but to serve, we are people who have a commitment to seek the good of others, the common good of the community as a whole.

This approach by James and John shows us that a desire to seek whatever we want and what we think is good for us, is the wrong starting place. The references Jesus makes to cup and baptism were probably about the suffering that lay ahead of him. For us they can also be about the sacraments by which we are united with Christ and sustained in our life in Christ. We do well to ponder what it means to stand with Christ in the midst of the suffering and the need of others, and act for their good before our own.

I imagine those disciples were afraid of a future that Jesus spoke of and which they could not understand. Fear of the unknown can drive us to self-interest and to jealousy and anger. Let us not be afraid. Let us seek to allay the fears of those who are. We carry the peace and hope of Christ within us, gifts of God to us, and through us to others. Let us be as Christ, alongside others, building a healthy community, finding our way together.