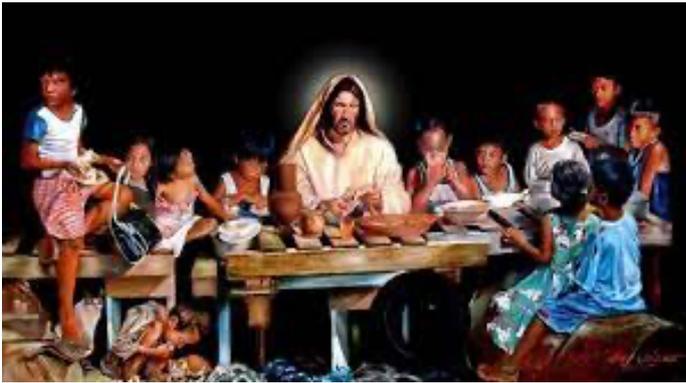


***“Anyone who welcomes one of these little children in my name, welcomes me”***



*“Ahakoa he iti he pounamu”*

*Despite being small you are  
of great value*

**In this weekend’s gospel Jesus embraces a little child and tells his disciples that ‘anyone who welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me’. He could be forgiven for being a little exasperated that after all the time the disciples have spent with him, witnessing his interactions with people – all the feeding, healing, forgiving, welcoming, touching and loving - his disciples still don’t get what he is about. He has had to remind the disciples that it’s not all about them, but rather it’s about *the other*, and particularly when the other is small, insignificant, vulnerable, lost, hurting or ‘unclean’. “If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all”.**

**It’s a powerful message, and one that challenged me when I was reading the Press one Saturday morning during lockdown. Some of you may have read the article about Awhi, a homeless man up north, who had made himself at home in a cave on the beach. The journalist described the lengths that many of the wealthy landowners nearby were going to get him out of the neighbourhood: lots of complaints, meetings and discussions with the council and lobbying from the local MP.**

**Surrounded by multimillion dollar properties, one might have expected Awhi to have some sense of entitlement to a modest little bit of real estate, but when asked by the journalist “If there was one thing you could have, what would it be?” there was a long pause before Awhi replied “I don’t think there is anything out there that I’d like to have. I get up in the morning, the sun is shining, and I am still above the ground”. For a moment, as I read Awhi’s words, I got to see a glimpse of the presence of God in the small and vulnerable, and remembered that often it is in our vulnerability and weakness, rather than in our strengths, that we can be more open to the infinite compassion and mercy of God.**

I was struck too by the irony of the Māori man's name 'Awhi', which of course means to embrace, include, or to hug. This is what Jesus did to the child in the gospel story as an example to his followers. It got me thinking about hospitality and inclusion - about what it is to be the first and the last, to be an insider or on the outer, to be the greatest or the servant – and what this gospel is calling us to.

Pope Francis would say that it is calling us to closeness and proximity, to community. In *Fratelli Tutti* he reminds us that “isolation and withdrawal into one's own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal. Rather it is closeness; it is the culture of encounter”. Caritas has produced some great reflective material on *Fratelli Tutti* for Social Justice Week, which provide some stimulating and challenging reading for anyone who would like to delve into this a little more. <https://caritas.org.nz/parishes/social-justice-week>. It was there that I found this beautiful prayer of Cameron Ballon's

#### ***A prayer for living “Fratelli Tutti”***

*When our lofty words of love have been emptied of their meaning,  
When our borders and computer screens have erected impenetrable walls,  
When our minds are so quick to conflate 'other' with 'enemy',  
How will we find our common humanity?  
It's never too late to make an earnest and tender start,  
May we move from our pockets the stones we intended to throw,  
And cement them together to build a home that welcomes all.  
May we repent of our indifference and move into genuine encounter,  
Instead of drawing battle lines,  
May we draw our chairs up to a communal table,  
Where we can feast in the knowledge of our shared dignity,  
May God grant us the holy vision  
To see every human being as a sacred mystery,  
And may we love each mystery not abstractly but concretely.  
Just as Thomas touched the wounds of Jesus,  
May we be unafraid to touch the wounds of our suffering neighbour.  
May we lay down our arms and offer our outstretched hands,  
Until there is no “them” but only “us”,  
Until we are at last, sisters and brothers, all.  
Amen*

**Please get in touch if you would like to share with me how people have gone out of their way to connect with each other during lockdown, or if your experience of lockdown has got you thinking about how to keep growing this ‘culture of encounter’ in our parish and beyond.**

**May God grant us all the holy vision to see each human being as a sacred mystery.**

**Joanne**



#### **Image credits**

**1. Hapag ng Pag-asa” (A Table of Hope) by Joey Velasco showing Jesus eating, not with his apostles, but with a group of street child in Manilla. Everyone in the painting was a depiction of a real child Velasco met and helped with his foundation**

**2. The Homeless Jesus - Sculpture by Timothy Schmalz**