Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you. – **Saint Augustine**…You can judge the quality of their faith from the way they behave. Discipline is an index to doctrine.' – **Tertullian**

August 11th **The Shofar** John 6

What does *believing in Jesus* mean?

Jesus had taught the crowd and his disciples about the road to life eternal… *This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.*

There are texts in the Bible that are scary. At least for those who like to think of ourselves as being more or less "good Christians". We may think like this for all kinds of reasons – I have always believed in God; I go to church; I do all kinds of things at the church and for the church or maybe it is just because I avoid the big sins. Even with all of that I still feel that there is no more terrifying text in all of Scripture than what we find in **Matthew 7** straight from the Lord Jesus Himself:

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, and do many miracles in your name?' Then I will announce to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you lawbreakers!

Now, there's a text that should make us take a second look at our faith lives. What is truly disturbing is the sense of absolute and complete surprise we find in these people. It never, until that very moment, entered our minds that we might be unknown to Jesus. We have lived – possibly for years or even decades, under the delusion that we were safe. Secure. True servants of Jesus. At least enough of a Christian for the loving Jesus to overlook our failings and sins.

If Jesus said what He meant and meant what He said, then it's not only possible but a certain reality that there will be people among us now (perhaps even ourselves?) who will go to our graves convinced we are eternally safe only to find out we have lived our entire lives in eternal danger. The faith we had convinced ourselves was genuine was in fact far from what Christ demands of us.

So how do we know if our faith is real?

The Bible gives us the answer: **(James 2:14-17)**.

"What use is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? In the same way, faith also, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself"

How do we know our faith is real? It's by a changed life exhibiting good works. To be clear, it is not these works that save us; not at all. It is that these good external works illuminate the reality of what has happened on the inside of us. If our faith is real, then our lives will show us. In particular, it will be manifested in the way we love, forgive and include others, even (especially) those we greatly dislike. If we are not on the front foot when it comes to forgiving others, to embracing the poor and the marginalised in the world around us, or faith is a sham.

It is all about what God thinks, not me

But wait – doesn't that contradict what Jesus was saying in the above passage? After all, the people in those verses were doing what seemed to be great things for God, weren't they? They rarely miss Sunday worship. They are even at our synods and have places in our parish councils. They always seem to be "giving" of themselves. We have all met them. They are among the ordained and the laity and they are most proficient in justifying what they do, think and speak. Sin is not a part of them, at least nothing likely to bar them from heaven. God understands.

In his letter, James argues that true faith results in us *doing* something. If our faith is inactive, it's like a dead body without a spirit (**James 2:17**). He repeats this in some form four different times, and the structure of his argument drives his point home. An inactive faith is really no faith at all. True faith ***does*** things. Should we desire to claim "I have faith" then we need to be prepared to point to our works, those works that arise out of a heart attuned to Jesus.

Faith Without Works is Dead: James 2:14-17

For the Jewish people, providing and caring for the poor was fundamental for living out the command to love God and love others. James reminds his readers that true faith acts on behalf of the poor and oppressed. If all we do is say, "Good luck! I hope you find what you need!" but we don't help, then we are manifesting an anaemic—and even a dead—faith.

In the last judgment scene in **Matthew 25**, Jesus makes God's expectations clear: *Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me… as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.*

Then Jesus continues on, showing the reverse of that scenario. There were those who didn't feed, clothe, and show compassion to the "least of these." There were those who failed to demonstrate the kingdom of God through the way they treated others, especially the vulnerable, those who appeared to be different and difficult. Jesus isn't saying that our acts toward the poor and needy are what save us. But if our hearts have truly been transformed, we *will* demonstrate that by being compassionate, loving, and generous to others—especially the "least of these."

Here is the question: *God has been so good and generous to us. Who are we to be anything else to others*? *To anyone.*

What God desires is a transformed heart

All through Scripture, God demonstrates his heart for the needy—and his judgment on those whose hearts are hard toward them. He rejects empty religious rituals that are all about show. What really demonstrates our faith is how we love God and love our neighbour (with no exceptions).

Isaiah 58 gets at this idea so beautifully. **Verses 6-7** say, *Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"*

True faith means our hearts are constantly being transformed. A transformed heart is demonstrated through action. Faith with no demonstrable action in changing our lives is no real faith at all. It is dead, James tells us, like a body without a spirit.

A community of faith stands out in the world

I have just come from a week in Cooktown where we stayed in the church grounds. I knew they were men and women of faith because of their love for us, for each other and for the wider town community. Having once spent time ministering in an Anglican community known for its division, for the blatant and self-righteous way some of the key stakeholders judged others and found them wanting Cooktown was refreshing. Their works were all *other* centred and through them Jesus was revealed in their midst. Not so the other community (though it was really a loose affiliation of cabals living in conflict more than a community). Like the Pharisees of the Gospel they spent more time in planning and plotting the downfall of those they did not like than exploring, in the Spirit ways to heal the Body of Christ. Sadly, the world saw

This is where the opening scary text from Jesus should come into play. It is not enough to say "Jesus is Lord" and go to church occasionally. Baptism requires more of us and Jesus demands more.

The Father wants us to *believe in Jesus* and that belief is only genuine when it manifests itself in the works make clear in the Sacred Scriptures.

But all is not lost. God is experienced in an outpouring of divine grace and that grace is more than enough to bring us back into His ways. If we desire a heart that is transformed and are willing to put in the hard yards of disciplining ourselves and living Gospel lives, then we can be confident in our trust in God. Sunday-only Christians place themselves into difficult situations because they are not walking with God. They do the minimum and expect God will do the maximum for them when it comes to time before the throne.

Read James. Ponder Matthew 25 and its judgment scene and then honestly ask whether our belief in Jesus matches what is demanded of those claiming to live in the Kingdom of God on this earth.