

Sermon 23 June 2019 Te Pouhere Sunday

John 15:9-17

I want to begin by having a quick look at what we are celebrating today – the Constitution (Te Pouhere) of our Church. The day is appropriately set in our Pentecost season, which of course celebrated the birthday of our Christian Church. There is another reason why Pentecost is an appropriate time to mark Te Pouhere, but I will get to that in a minute. The decision was made at General Synod in 1992 to ratify a new constitution forming us into one church made up of three tikanga or strands of Maori, Pakeha and Pasefika. This was not an attempt to divide the church into three different racial camps, as has been the criticism of some, but rather to provide and cater for different cultural differences in the way we worship. The intent has always been for partnership.

Let's be clear here, a true church should and must embrace people of a multiplicity of differences. I made the point two weeks ago that the birth of our Church at Pentecost took place with a multiple range of cultures present. Surely that is a pointer, a signal for what should be the nature and character of our Church. It is a very good reason, I believe, for Te Pouhere Sunday to be celebrated in the Pentecost season.

Surely also, we need to look to Jesus for a guide as to what our church should look like. And just in case you are not too sure what his thoughts on the matter might be, let me give an example. John 17:21, Jesus says, *'My prayer for all is that they will be one, just as you and I are one, Father.'* Paul puts it very well in Galatians 3:28, *'There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. For you are all Christians – you are one in Christ Jesus.'* If that doesn't spell it out plain and simple, I don't know what does, and yet have we really taken notice? Have we really put this into practice? Unfortunately all too often, our church is segregated by race, age and social background, all of which goes against everything Jesus stood for.

There is a wonderful story about a church in Mississippi, USA that sought to integrate its ranks. Horror of horrors, there were rumours that blacks might show up at white churches to worship. Some white churches hired armed guards to keep them out. Other white churches considered allowing them to attend services. One congregation was split right down the middle. Half voted no, the other half voted yes. After a contentious meeting to resolve the stalemate, one of the church leaders hurriedly left the meeting to deliver the news to his mother who was a firm believer in old-time segregation.

'Well, what did you decide?' she demanded. 'We decided to let them attend services.' 'You know I'm very much opposed to that!' she said. 'I know, Mother, but think about it this way. What would Jesus do?' 'I know good and well what he would do', she huffed, 'He'd say, let them in!' She paused a moment, pondering the implications, then added, 'But he'd be wrong!'

At least she came out and said it. Unfortunately, there are many of us, in a wide range of circumstances, who by virtue of our actions and words, contradict what Jesus teaches us and would have us say and do.

I want to reflect for a moment on our gospel reading, a well-known passage in which Jesus, once again, emphasises, not only the importance of love, but how it is through love that produce fruit. What he means is that it is by expressing love for others, and there is a multitude of ways we can do that, we can have a positive influence or effect on people. Let's look at a very simple example. I am sure we all have had many experiences where we have encountered a warm and friendly person in a shop, an office, any sort of public place. Doesn't it give you a lift? Doesn't the world seem, all at once, a better place? Don't you feel good about yourself?

Mother Teresa said, *'Spread love wherever you go. Be the living expression of God's kindness: kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile, kindness in your warm greeting. Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier.'*

Then on a different level there is the whole issue of what we refer to as community outreach. In this passage Jesus commands us to love one another and in the same breath to lay down our lives for others. This simply means to make sacrifices for others. This simply means that we need to give something of ourselves in order to benefit others. This is the whole rationale behind the providing of facilities in our new church that will allow us to run programmes for the community.

I strongly believe that that is how we will touch those in our community and draw them into our church community. Two days ago I made a submission to the Diocesan Council

requesting capital funds for the build of our new church. I quote from that submission: *'I believe very strongly that it is the role of the church to provide support for the local community in whatever way it can. Not*

only does this go some way towards carrying out Jesus's command to 'love our neighbour', but I also believe that evangelism and community outreach must go hand in hand.'

I could well have quoted today's gospel reading. Gone are the days when we can sit back in our ivory tower and wait for the community to knock down the door in order to join our church. We have to get out there and make it happen. As Jesus says, *'I appointed you to go and produce fruit that will last.'*

To sum up, if we want to establish God's kingdom here in Flat Bush, and let's face it, that's what we are attempting to do, we need to reach out and embrace all and sundry – no discrimination, no judgment, no picking and choosing, no prejudice, no bias. That is the spirit of Te Pouhere Sunday, that is the spirit of Jesus's command 'to love one another.'

Only by living that spirit will we truly reflect the nature of God. Only by living that spirit will we grow as a church.