

Sermon 19 June 2022 Te Pouhere Sunday

John 15:9-17

I want to begin by reminding ourselves at what we are celebrating today – the Constitution (Te Pouhere) of the Anglican Church. The day is appropriately set in the Pentecost season, which of course celebrates the birthday of our Christian Church.

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 but rather to provide and cater for different cultural differences in the way we worship. The intent has always been for partnership.

Let me once again emphasise a point I seem to be making in a frequent basis these days, a true church should and must embrace people of a multiplicity of differences. I made the point two weeks that the birth of our church at Pentecost took place with a multiple range of cultures present, and that this is surely a pointer, a signal for what should be the nature and character of our church. It is a very good reason 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 thought on the matter might be, let me give you 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. I don't want to sound like a stuck needle but for our church to be real, it cannot be segregated by race, age or social background, all of which goes against everything Jesus stood for.

There is a wonderful story of a church in Mississippi, USA that sought to integrate its ranks. Horror of horrors, there were rumours that African Americans 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 the old-time segregation.

'Well, what did you decide?' she demanded. 'We decided to let them attend services,' her son replied. '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, and then she 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 we produce fruit. *'I appointed you to go and bear 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 or any sort of public place. Doesn't it give you a lift? Doesn't the world seem, all at once, a better place? You can feed off that encounter for the rest of the day.

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.'* That really does say it all.

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. Again, apologies for sounding like a stuck needle, but this is the whole rationale behind the providing of facilities in our new church that will allow us to run programmes for the community.

Three years ago I made a submission to the Diocesan Council requesting capital funds for the build of our new church. I quote from that submission because this really does express and sum up that rationale. *'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' command to 'love our neighbour,' but I also believe that evangelism and community outreach go hand in hand.'* In other words, growth of the gospel, growth of our church will only be achieved through connecting with and caring for our local community.

This is the spirit of Te Pouhere Sunday – reaching out and embracing all and sundry. No discrimination, no judgment, no picking and choosing, no prejudice, no bias. Only by living that spirit will we truly reflect the nature of God. And if we don't reflect the true nature of God, we cannot expect to grow.

Reverend Warner Wilder

