

## Sermon June 11 2023 Te Pouhere Sunday

### Matthew 7:24-29

I want to begin by reminding ourselves of what we are celebrating today, Te Pouhere Sunday – it is the Constitution (Te Pouhere) of our Anglican 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. It has a ring of the Holy Trinity, which we looked at last week – one church but at the same time three churches in their own right! Anyway, this was not an attempt to divide the church into three different churches based on racial lines, as has been the criticism from some quarters, but rather to provide for different cultural differences in the way we worship.

Let's be clear here, a true church should and must embrace people of a multiplicity of differences and backgrounds. 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 are on the matter, 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 one in Christ.'* 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.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus tells us that anyone who takes on board his teaching is like a person who builds his house on solid rock. That house will survive any storm. In the same way, anyone who doesn't listen to his teaching, is like a person who builds his house on sand. That house will not survive. Let's apply that analogy to our church. That is appropriate for two reasons.

Firstly, we are after all celebrating the founding of the constitution of our church today. Secondly, we are in the process of attempting to build a new church ourselves. I say 'attempting' because we don't appear to have made much headway over the past twelve months, but that is another story for another time! The point I want to make, is that the foundation of our church must not just be believing in the values of our faith, it must be actually living out those values. It is no good having articles of faith if we don't adhere to them. It is no good quoting the Bible if we don't actually live by the Bible. I really think this is what Jesus means when he refers to people actually listening to him.

We have a problem with the church. The first problem is that the church is made up of people and we are all very human. We have our faults and we make mistakes.

The second problem is our image. For whatever reason, the perception beyond the immediate Christian community is not always favourable. Previously I have referred to a comprehensive survey carried out in New Zealand a few years ago on religion and faith. One of the findings was that a significant proportion of the population have a negative perception of Christians. The words 'judgmental', 'hypocrites, and 'exclusive' cropped up frequently.

There is a true story of a woman who was being counselled by a Christian. This woman was dealing with anxiety over her sexual orientation. The Christian woman suggested to her that she might like to come to church with her, her idea being that she might receive some emotional support, meet some nice people. The woman was appalled, 'You have to be joking,' she said, 'and be subjected to all that judgment!' Oh dear.

Let me be clear, not for one moment do I believe this is the case here in our church, or for that matter, in most churches, but the reality is that the perception is out there and we have to do everything we can to change that perception.

Along those lines, another little anecdote, a few years ago in the wake of the Israel Folau saga, a columnist in the Listener wrote an article condemning the judgmental nature of the Christian community. He stated that this reflected what the clergy had been saying for the last two thousand years. Ouch! He also alluded to Mr Brian Tamaki as being representative of this judgmental disposition. I actually wrote to him saying that I thought this was an unfair blanket judgment on the clergy, and if he thought that Brian Tamaki's views reflected those of mainstream clergy, then he was clearly out of touch with the state of affairs in the church, which is probably just why he wrote the article that he did. Needless to say, I received no reply, but, my friends, this is what we are up against with regards the perception of our church and the Christian community.

Speaking of being judgmental, one of the social issues we are regularly confronted with in the media is racism. Racism is about judging people purely on the basis of the colour of their skin or their culture. The United States certainly grabs the headlines here, with regular reports of someone being either shot dead or badly injured with racism appearing to be a major factor. However, racism is certainly not confined to the USA and we here in Aotearoa are by no means squeaky clean.

Some years ago, there was an article in the NZ Herald about a woman who in 2011 took her 60-year-old mother, who is Maori, to a café in Whanganui. Her mother asked the person behind the counter if they had a toilet she could use. She was told they didn't have one and she would have to use the one down the street at Subways, so her mother toddled off to Subways. A moment later a Pakeha woman came in and asked the same question. She was told they had a toilet out the back and she was most welcome to use it. The daughter overheard the conversation and was furious and asked them why they had sent her mother down the street to use the toilet. The racism was so overt that they didn't try to make an excuse but they did apologise to the daughter, but interestingly said nothing to her mother when she returned. Her mother could see that her daughter was upset and so her daughter told her what had happened. Her mother's reply is so very sad. She said, 'Don't worry, dear. I am used to it. It happens all the time.'

The point I want to make is this – as a society we can very judgmental. In many ways, it is very much a human failing. But despite the perception out there, it actually goes against not just what Jesus teaches us, but also what our church should stand for. I go back to what Jesus said, *'My prayer for all is that they will all be one,'* or as Paul said, *'For you are all Christians – you are one in Jesus Christ.'*

Jesus said, 'Love your neighbour.' He didn't say, 'Love your neighbour as long as he/she looks like you, thinks like you, believes like you.' Interestingly, in the passage just before our Gospel passage, Jesus says this, *'Not all people who sound religious are really godly.'* Now that is being quite confronting, and perhaps that is just why that negative perception is out there. We need to listen to what he has to say. We need to walk the talk, practise what we preach. This is the code of conduct, the values on which our church must be built. For our church to grow, we must be prepared to reach out across boundaries of race, culture, personality and even creed. And we must take personal responsibility to ensure this happens.

Reverend Warner Wilder

