

Sermon 22 June 2025 Te Pouhere Sunday

Galatians 3:24-29 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 Pentecostal season, which of course celebrates the birthday of our Christian church. This year it has added meaning as Matariki, the Maori New Year, is also celebrated. Very appropriate, and more about that later.

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 on a frequent basis these days – 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, and that is surely a pointer, a signal for what should be the nature and character of our church. On that point alone, 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. I refer to the point I made three weeks ago – most importantly, we need to be inclusive and unified. I repeat the quote I used: *‘My prayer for all is that they will all be one, just as you and I are one, Father.’* John 17:21. Paul puts it very well in our first reading: *‘There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. For you are all Christians – you are one in Christ Jesus.’* Galatians 3:28.

If that doesn’t spell it out plain and simply, 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.

I remind you of the 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. Her son replied, ‘We decided to let them attend services.’ ‘You know I am very much opposed to that,’ his mother said. ‘I know, mother, but think about it this way. What would Jesus say?’ ‘I know good and well what he would say,’ 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 produce lasting fruit.’* John 15:16. 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 of effect on people.

Let's look at a very simple example. I am sure we have all had many experiences where we have encountered a warm, 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. *'Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.'* John 15:12-13. In Jesus' case, that is literally what he did, of course. But in our case, it is more about being prepared to make a significant sacrifice 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 programmes to be run for the community. It is simply putting into practice the quote from Jesus we have just referred to.

Some years ago, I made a submission to the Diocesan Council requesting funds for the build of our new church and community centre. I quote from that submission because this really does 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 picking and choosing, no prejudice, no bias. Only by living by 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.

I want to finish by acknowledging and referring to Matariki. Apart from anything else, it is very appropriate to where we are today. Matariki is a time to acknowledge our past. History is a very important part of who we are as a people, and we give thanks for all those who have been part of that history. But most importantly, it is a time for planning, goal-setting and the planting of seeds for growth in the year to come. Don't tell me that's not appropriate for us right now! Matariki is a time when we can begin to put in place the transference of intentions into authenticity, into reality. How appropriate is that for us right now.

And finally, Matariki celebrates diversity. If you haven't heard that word before, I would venture to say you have been sound asleep! I finish with the words from Josefa Iloilo, former President of Fiji: *'We need to reach that happy stage of our development when differences and diversity are not seen as sources of division and distrust, but of strength and inspiration.'*