

Tui,tui tuia matou. Weave, weave us together....

Today is Te Pouhere or Constitution Sunday. “Pou” meaning a post like the great posts that support the ridgepole of a whare nui or meeting house, “here” with the meaning of a guide. So Te Pouhere the guiding framework, a good translation of constitution. Solid, like the rock on which the man built his house.

The Constitution we are remembering today is that of the Anglican church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia, or Te hahi Mihinare ki Aotearoa, ki Niu Tireni ki Nga Moutere o Te Moana Nui a Kiwa.

And it is unusual in that this feast we mark today is not allied to a significant event in the life of Jesus, an act of God, nor yet a theological doctrine. It is marking the end of a process engaged on by our Church in Aotearoa - NZ with Polynesia, one step towards living out the command of Christ that we love one another as we are loved. And as such, permeated by, created with the Gospel message, the gospel command.

And so I'd like to invite you on a hikoi with me today, to explore briefly some aspects of our weaving a united Church from the strands we inherited from our past, and indeed to provide a launching post for a way forward, for to stand in the present, looking to the future, we need to know the foundation beneath our feet. Nor must we forget that we are one of a worldwide family of Anglican churches all with much in common but also their own individuality.

The Anglican church in New Zealand had its beginnings in the Bay of Islands. The Maori chief Ruatara agreed to give protection to three missionary families sent by the Rev Samuel Marsden to Oihi. Missionary teaching in the Maori language spread the Gospel throughout New Zealand, assisted by the early Maori converts. It was essentially a Maori focussed missionary church.

With the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi and increasing numbers of Pakeha settlers, there was a need to provide a church setting for them. George Augustus Selwyn, our first Bishop, was appointed in 1842 and the focus was on the Book of Common Prayer and English hymns and music. This Anglican church did not have a state connection - our Constitution of 1857 made NZ an autonomous province.

Over the next 100 years dioceses were created and churches built – but largely determined by European settlers. The church among the Maori people only survived under the control of the settler church. This was an ongoing source of pain, of grief.

But in the late 20th century, the winds of change, the wind of the Spirit were blowing. Just as NZ started to identify what made it distinct as a nation, so the church tried new forms of services to acknowledge our context, resulting in our NZ Prayer Book.

And in May, 1984 the General Synod of our Province, presided over by Archbishop Paul Reeves, passed a motion committing our church to re-examining the principles of bicultural development and partnership as envisaged by the Treaty of Waitangi – and indeed, the Treaty itself. When we gathered at Rotorua two years later, on receiving the report of the recently-established bi-cultural commission, we undertook to embrace the concepts of partnership and bi-cultural development as an essential component of the foundation for a developing social contract between Maori and Pakeha; both these principles were seen as consistent with the teaching of Christ. And so the work to formalise this new relationship, to enshrine it in our fundamental mission, began – and for many present, the image of the Maori Christ etched into the window of St Faith's Church was a moment of awakening.

It would be easy – and possibly rather boring – simply to quote from the accounts of General Synod just how we as a church here responded to this challenge. But that would be to do it a huge disservice, for in fact we were, at flax roots level, carving out a new path where three tikanga – for Polynesia was now part of the mix too – could learn from one another, respect one another, truly live the words of Paul: “In Christ, there is neither east nor west....”. It was a message as potentially transformational as the teaching of Jesus in his day.

So the following four years saw all kinds of workshops, hui, discussions and questionnaires as those charged with preparing a new Constitution, or Pouhere for us set about this work. For though the world around us was changing, there were many who saw this proposed change as something to be feared. Most New Zealanders of European descent were resolutely monolingual; fortunately, our Maori brothers and sisters were as resolutely patient with us.

And the gradual adoption of words and expressions in Te Reo in our Liturgy did bring a degree of reassurance, and I for one rejoice at the ease with which so many of us are now managing even limited use of Te Reo. Isn't our language enriched with the concept evoked by such words as mana, whanau, whakapapa?

One change which was practised from an early stage of debate, or korero, was a less adversarial form of decision making; we adopted instead the practice of hui, talking until a point of consensus was reached. And we could, where appropriate, meet in Tikanga groups, coming back together when we had arrived at a point where God's grace brought about a common mind. Or, as sometimes happened, where one party withdrew, in cases where there were significant differences in mores, where we could agree to differ. This was true respect, the one of the other. It was grace.

And so our revised constitution recognised our three tikanga(way/style) of Maori, Pakeha and Pasifika. Te Pihopatanga o Aotearoa was expanded, five Hui Amorangi, or regional bishoprics, were established, and four bishops ordained to assist the Maori Archbishop in their administration. Tikanga Pasifika are developing a model which meets their needs. Our Diocesan and General Synods meet to discuss and regulate the shape of our multi-faceted church. Bishops, clergy and laity gather to seek a consensus, as on a marae or at a hui.

On Monday, 11 May, 1992, Archbishop Brian Davis addressed General Synod, and I quote: "We have assembled for the most momentous Synod since the first Constitution in 1857 provided the structural blueprint for the Church of the Province of New Zealand". He described both as visionary, but like us all, was only too aware of the pitfalls ahead. It had been a journey of pain and joy, of doubt and hope, of struggle and of triumph. And, to quote again Archbishop Brian, the institutional change proposed could be justified by one criterion only – that the Church could as a consequence be more obedient to God and more faithful to Christ's mission. And far from diminishing the influence of each tikanga, in making it part of a three-way covenant, the mana of each has been enhanced.

At the time, our Constitution was hailed as a game-changer, a model for secular NZ to adopt. And 30 years later, the need is even more pressing. We need, more than ever, to be able to tell our story, to inform our own people in such a way as to invite participation, which will in turn draw us closer in Christ's love.

Three weeks ago, we welcomed Pihopa Richard to this Cathedral. In his address, he referred several times to the three baskets of knowledge, a part of the legacy of Tāne. That day, and today, I wear a bone carving gifted to me by local iwi, marking the end of that process our Church embarked on in 1984.

Just last week I came across an image in a novel I was reading which has been sitting with me ever since. It talked about the differences between the European practice of rowing, which is always looking behind, and the Maori or Pasifika waka, where the driving force looks ahead. The work begun in 1992 is far from complete – let us be thankful for it, and now slip our moorings from Te Pouhere and set out, in the name of the Matua in whose image we are all created, and proclaim the Good News.

Master weaver, you are the creator and we are the flax. Remind us that you have woven us so that no strand by itself reveals your design, but together we are the whāriki, Te Pouhere. Amen.

Kororia ki te Atua!