

19 June 2022

Isaiah 42:10-20
2 Corinthians 5:14-19
John 17:6-19

A long time ago, during the time I worked for Telecom, I once attended a very tense meeting with representatives of one of Telecom's competitors. Both sides had their commercial representatives, their technical experts, and (significantly) their lawyers present. The subject matter of the meeting revolved around a major dispute that had arisen over payment for the services of Telecom used by that competitor, and at the root of the dispute was the question of whether a particular sort of call should be treated as a type that incurred no charge, or as a type that was chargeable.

A rare light-hearted moment in that very fraught meeting occurred when our opponent's lead negotiator stated emphatically, "Look, if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it's a duck."

Quick as a flash, Telecom's negotiator responded, "No: if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, and is *defined in contract to be a duck*, then it's a duck."

What defines us?

Today we celebrate Te Pouhere Sunday. It is a day set apart to celebrate part of what defines us, the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. "Te Pouhere" is the term used to refer to the Constitution of our church.

The original Constitution of the Anglican Church in New Zealand was dated 1857, and was drafted by Bishop Selwyn. It contained features that at the time were far reaching and distinctive. Bishops would be elected, rather than appointed by the Crown. In the Synod, the governing body, any one of the three houses of bishops, clergy and laity could exercise a veto on the others.

The Church in New Zealand was to have a certain independence both from the Church in England and from the Crown in New Zealand.

In these kinds of things, we see the Church seeking to be responsive to the particular needs of the time and place in which it found itself, while still honouring its heritage and maintaining its family links to the worldwide Anglican family.

But this 1857 Constitution was unfortunately, too, a product of its time. Despite the momentum of the early years through the efforts of CMS missionaries and missionary endeavour within Maoridom itself, Selwyn “ignored constant appeals from the missionaries and the CMS in London to train and ordain more Maori teachers, deacons and priests, thereby not only dampening Maori enthusiasm, but undermining missionary momentum.”¹ Church participation among Maori would decline alarmingly in the years to follow the signing of the Constitution.

After many years of little change, and some periods of grudging improvement, at last in 1992 a new Constitution was adopted. This provided for what is known as the “three Tikanga model” in which each *Tikanga* (or cultural approach) – Maori, Pakeha, and Polynesia – has an equal place. Each has considerable freedom to organise its own life and to express itself in culturally helpful ways, while preserving the essential unity of the whole. Mutual interdependence exists between the Tikanga, and this mutual interdependence occurs in the context of a covenant relationship.

As part of the outworking of the 1992 Constitution a great deal of work has been done, and continues, to find ways of fairly sharing the resources of the Church – for example, trust funds and land. This kind of work can be difficult: it is true that we can all get rather attached to *our* things, isn’t it?

¹ Newman, *Bible and Treaty*, p.318

It seems to me that in order to develop and maintain this approach to the constitutional arrangements for our church each party has had to exhibit the qualities of embrace: in order to embrace, each party has to open their arms to make space for the other; and while embracing each party is united to the other but still remains distinct.

There is an important principle here: to embrace, to love, to become united, requires giving something up, making room in our life for one another. To be united in seeking the common good may mean that the stronger part has to give away some control or resources in order to strengthen the weaker part.

As I said, the Constitution is known as Te Pouhere. “Pouhere” is the Maori word for constitution. The “pouhere” is literally a hitching post, the place where people tie up their waka. The idea is that the Constitution forms the common hitching post, to which are tied the three large waka of Tikanga Pakeha, Maori, and Pasifika.

Saint Paul wrote to the people of Corinth

... if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

The message and ministry of reconciliation is fundamental to our life together in Christ. And it is part of the reason that we have our three tikanga constitution.

However, there is also a sense of regret expressed from time to time that the three identities created under this Constitution have made it easy to ignore our brothers and sisters from one or other of the Tikanga.

This concern about the cost and risk of the present constitutional model should remind us that any Constitution (and indeed the Church itself) is only provisional. It is simply part of the expression of God's work in the world at *this* time and in *this* place. Bishop Selwyn and his contemporaries in 1857 adopted a unique Constitution that addressed some of the needs of that time, in a new nation being formed a long long way from "Mother England". The 1992 *Pouhere* addressed the recognized needs of that season. No constitution or particular expression of God's Church is eternal or universal: only God is. We need to be constantly open to the new thing that God may be doing in our midst in our time.

"If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, and is *defined in contract to be a duck*, then it's a duck."

Paul wrote, in Galatians 3:28-29,

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

When Paul wrote to the Galatians he was writing because he was alarmed that his formerly pagan converts were being told that the gospel he had preached to them was incomplete. Some were saying that, to belong to the people of God, the males among these converts should accept circumcision and other Jewish customs.

Paul is emphatic. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise – that is, if you belong to Christ, you are a member of the family of God, an inheritor of the covenant promise God had made to Abraham. Nothing else is needed.

And the practical conclusion then is that the old differences – Jew/Gentile, slave/free, male/female – don't matter in that way anymore.

Or to put it another way – it doesn't matter much whether or not you look like what people think is a Christian, swim like a Christian, or quack like a Christian, because it is in and through *Christ* that you come to be defined as a Christian!

In the same way, Jesus talks in John 17 of our fundamental unity in him – “that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me”. Part of the mystery of the Holy Trinity is that Jesus does not disappear into God the Father or the Holy Spirit: they are one, yet remain three; Jesus is one with the Father in the Godhead, but remains distinct. We are invited to share in the common life of the Holy Trinity. And that should inform the way we regard others.

Just a few sentences further on, as Jesus prays he notes that his disciples are in the world but not of the world. Showing partiality or favouritism towards one's race or “tribe” or group at the expense of others is part of the *world's* way: we are called to a *different* way. Stifling open discussion and the development of mutual understanding by hurling slogans and weaponising language is part of the world's way; we are called to a different way.

All this is a reminder that there is a hitching post which is vastly more important than Te Pouhere, our Anglican constitution: it is Christ. It is to Christ that we owe our ultimate allegiance; it is loyalty to Christ that ultimately matters. Any other thing by which we might try to define ourselves, any other thing that gives us stability and arranges our life together, *any* other thing must be regarded as secondary and capable of change: our being in Christ Jesus is what is primary and permanent.

The metaphor of being tied to the hitching post reminds me of another metaphor involving rope, and one which too has a nautical theme. It is the idea of being lashed to the mast.² In ancient myth, Ulysses made a pact with

² I owe this metaphor to Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: the shape of pastoral integrity*.

his men as they sailed towards the Sirens. The Sirens were beautiful yet dangerous creatures who lured nearby sailors with their enchanting music and voices to shipwreck on the rocky coast of their island.

Ulysses wanted to hear the Sirens' song despite knowing that doing so would render him incapable of rational thought. So he put wax in his men's ears so that they could not hear the Sirens, and had them tie him to the mast so that he could not jump into the sea. He ordered the sailors not to change course under any circumstances, and to keep their swords upon him and to attack him if he should break free of his bonds.

Our commitment to Christ must be like being lashed to the mast, held fast to Christ so that we don't get lured by the siren voices of our changing desires, or our today-centred understanding of our needs, or our consumer orientation as we pick and choose what we like in the department store of life, or the pull of identity politics – attitudes as prevalent in the church as they are anywhere else. We lash ourselves to the mast that is Christ, because ultimately it is faithful obedience to him that is all that matters.

Circumstances will change. The Church – wherever we look around the world or in New Zealand, in whatever denomination or expression – is having to undergo change. The world continues to change, and some of what once worked works no longer. And that can be scary as we come to recognize that the stability of the institution defined in our *Pouhere* might need to give way to a more flexible and potentially fragile form as we seek to heed God's call to what is right and needful in this season.

So we lash ourselves to the mast, we cling to Christ; through the Holy Spirit we seek to block out the siren voices that would draw us to ruin; and we seek to sail obediently wherever Christ calls us.

Sources

- Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, especially pp. 873-875
- Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians*, SPCK, 2003
- Wright, *John for Everyone: Part 2, chapters 11-21*, SPCK, 2004 [2nd ed]
- Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: a theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation*, Abingdon, 1996.
- Davis, B N, *The Way Ahead*, Caxton, 1995.
- Davidson A K, *Christianity in Aotearoa: a history of church and society in New Zealand*, NZ Education for Ministry, 1997 [2nd Ed]
- Keith Newman, *Bible and Treaty: missionaries among the Maori – a new perspective*, Penguin, 2010
- Dawson, J, *A Radical Theology of Baptism*, self published, 2011