



Te Pouhere Sunday

Acts 10:30-48

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I am going to start with a bit of history. In 1992, the NZ Anglican church agreed at its national gathering, General Synod, to develop a three-part system for its governing body. This means there are now three Archbishops, (Maori, Pakeha and Pasifika) and the three share authority, power and resources within the church. They oversee three streams of the church: Maori, Pakeha and Polynesian.

This Sunday is set apart to remember and celebrate this structural organisation. But there is more than one opinion about the Tikangas and whether this regime has been successful after 30 years. The Maori and Polynesian people who particularly wanted the change have achieved their goal, responsibilities have been shared, but others miss the whole church meeting together at all levels.

Fortunately, in Whangaparaoa parish, we have people from many different races, with differing cultures and languages who happily worship together, focussing on the culture of the Kingdom of God, their common bond.

This gives us a richness as a church. It is a gift from God. Those who were not born in this country bring experiences of life and church of which the native-born NZ person has no knowledge. When we consider the body of Christ, Paul admonishes us that the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," and the head cannot say to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, he says, those parts of the body that seem weaker are indispensable and the parts that we think are less honourable we need to treat with special honour. That means everyone is needed, everyone has a part to play.

Remember when appendectomies were very common? Doctors thought the appendix had no particular purpose and was just a weird spare part of the body, so just cut it out. Now it is it's believed that appendixes may help us recover from diarrhoea, and infections of the intestines. Just so, we can dismiss parts of the body of Christ which are not like us and whom we don't understand, but God has a purpose for them and considers them valuable.

Comparisons are odious, so the saying goes. Looking at the OT history of the Jewish nation, we can see the problems that arose because of the people wanting what other nations around them had. A prime example is that Israel wanted a King. They wanted a human leader who would look impressive and rival the kings of the nations around them. They wanted someone to follow, whom they could see, someone who could lead them to victory against other nations vying for power, prestige, wealth, etc.

They clamoured for a King, but God wanted to be their leader. This seemed difficult to the Jews. How can you explain to a foreigner, "Well, no, you can't see our King, but he really does exist. We follow what he has revealed to us and his way is not our way and his way is not your way. We therefore have to wait and carefully seek his will when we are attacked by a foreign army or when we are being blandished by someone trying to make a treaty with us." In the end, God gave them what they demanded, and Old Testament history is full of examples of good kings and bad kings; some who led them into idolatry; others who, like David, loved the Lord with all their hearts – made mistakes for sure, wandered away from God at times, but overall, pleased God and followed his ways.

We must remember, however, that God's original plan and purpose was to be their leader and indeed, in the beginning with Adam and Eve, Father God's habit was to walk and talk with them in the garden in the cool of the evening. One God, delighting in one family.

The ultimate purpose of God is summed up by Paul in Eph 1:10 – to bring all things together, under one head, Jesus Christ, and his instructions to us as a church are summed up in Ephesians 4: *“Be completely humble and gentle, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one Body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is over all and through all and in all.”*

But humans have a habit of wanting to have things their own way and to work stuff according to their own advantage. So we have the record of the early church in Acts where the Greeks in the church complained that their widows were being overlooked in the daily food distribution. The solution reached after prayer, was to appoint men who were filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom to see that the distribution was equitable. They appointed seven men of Greek origin to prevent the unfairness towards the Greek widows. But fortunately, they carefully chose men full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, which helped settle down the racial problems.

Now let's look at Acts 10, our epistle reading for the day. It recounts a time when Peter had a life-changing “AHA!” moment. Life-changing for him as a church leader and also for the whole church. Earlier in the chapter, the devout Roman centurion, Cornelius, had seen an angel who instructed him to send for St Peter who could tell him something very important. Peter was the person chosen by God to bring this man the good news of Jesus and his Kingdom.

The Jews viewed all Gentiles (that is, all non-Jews) as unclean and kept totally separate from them, but Peter was given a vision from God which blasted his cultural norms out of the water.

In the vision, a sheet was let down from heaven, full of different kinds of ritually clean and ritually unclean animals. “Get up, Peter – kill and eat,” came the voice. “No, Lord,” said Peter. “I have never eaten anything unclean.” God simply replied, “Do not call unclean that which God has made clean.” Then shortly afterwards, men knocked on the door to ask Peter to come visit Cornelius. Off Peter went, against all his cultural training, and we pick up where Peter is in Cornelius' house. Cornelius is speaking:

‘The angel told me where you were, Peter, so I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.

Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached--how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.

He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen--by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.’

The events which surround this passage are unusual: the vision Peter had, the angelic visit Cornelius had, and the combination of these two events was transformational for the early church. On the day of Pentecost, 3,000 people had been saved as a result of the Holy Spirit coming in power in Jerusalem. Luke records in Acts 2 that they were God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. So Peter's first sermon netted thousands of Jewish people. “I will make you a fisher of men” was what Jesus had promised. But God wanted more than

that. He wanted to break down of the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles and to make the church out of every tribe and language and nation.

That “I now realise” moment that Peter had, is one of several in his life. First, there was a time when he realised who **he** was and said to Jesus, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.” Secondly, later on, he realised that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. And now, the moment of revelation came regarding God’s intention to include the Gentiles in his salvation plan.

For a Jewish man, this idea went against everything he would have been taught at Synagogue and from the attitudes of the people he grew up with. The great gulf between Jews and Gentiles, the divide of ritually clean and ritually unclean people was foundational to their understanding of who they were as Jews and how to relate to other nations. But Jesus’ sacrificial death changed all that.

In Ephesians 2:14 Paul says, *“For he himself (that is, Jesus) is our peace, who has made the two to be one (that is Jews and Gentiles) and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations.”* It was mostly because of the law that the Hebrew people were so hostile to the Gentiles. But Paul carries on in v15, *“[God’s] purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross.”*

From this passage it is clear that Jesus’ whole goal for Jews and Gentiles, these people of different races, cultures and languages, was to make no more racial division but to preach peace to those who are far away and peace to those who are near, for through Jesus both Jews and Gentiles have access to Father God.

Acts 17:26 says, “From one man he (God) made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth. And he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.”

Cornelius was reaching out for God in the way he knew to do, and this pleased God. In chapter 10v4, the angel says to Cornelius, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.” However, that did not mean that he had no need for anything else. Like him, every person on earth needs to come to God in repentance and faith through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Otherwise, why would God have needed to send an angel to speak to Cornelius? The man needed Peter’s help to understand God’s plan of salvation. And in his perfect timing, God gave Peter the vision of the sheet full of animals, to open his heart and mind to go and visit Cornelius, the Gentile.

But later, there was potential trouble back at the ranch. How to persuade the 3,000 or more Jewish converts to accept non-Jewish followers of Christ? It is difficult for us to grasp the impossible gulf between Jew and Gentile in those days. But they said (Acts 11:18) *“Praise God that he has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.”* The Old Testament did not itself support an ultimate racial divide, in that Psalmists and prophets foretold the day when God’s Messiah would inherit the nations, the Lord’s servant would be their light, all nations would come to the mountain of the Lord and God would pour out his spirit on all mankind. But other parts of the OT warned against allowing inter-marriage for example, because of the danger of idolatry creeping into the Jewish camp.

And because we are baptised into one body, let us keep the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of love and peace. All our church relationships need to be governed by the love of God poured into our hearts and overflowing. If Ian preaches and can understand parts of the Bible others have never read, he is nothing if he doesn’t have love. If I give all I possess to the poor and have faith to work miracles, I am nothing if I don’t have love.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude or self-seeking, it is not easily angered; it does not rehearse a record of wrongs done to it. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth. It always protects, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

That’s such a high standard. How can we reach it? How can we love the other Christians in that way, let alone anyone else? Well, you can’t give what you don’t have. Let’s pray now, for a revelation of the love of God into our hearts.

“Lord we long to know your love deep within our hearts, so that every word that comes out of our mouths shows your love. We long to be filled to overflowing with your love. Cleanse us from wrong thought patterns that destroy the unity you want in your church. Turn us from self-gratifying ways to encourage and bless even the people we find hard to respect or like.

We need your help, Lord. Amen.”