

One size does not fit all

Acts 10:34-43

18 June 2017

Ten years ago, while visiting my home city of New Plymouth, I was out walking one afternoon, when I encountered several men whose distinctive dress made it clear they were priests from the Church of St Nicholas, a Greek Orthodox Church, which had opened just a few months earlier. I stopped and spoke with them for a while, and they invited me to join them for matins the following morning, which I did. They then invited me to have breakfast with them, and we had an incredibly inspiring conversation about our faith.

This was not my first experience of attending a church that primarily catered for a culture other than my own. Some years earlier, I had attended a Russian Orthodox Church a few times. I could not understand a word, and I was not exactly a religious person at the time, but I loved the ritual, incense, and liturgy, and I could sense a connection with something beyond my mortal existence.

There are many churches that cater specifically for people from particular cultures. As well as Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches, there are Orthodox Churches for people of various other nationalities. There are Samoan Methodist Churches. Korean Presbyterian Churches. And various others.

The Church is the Body of Christ, and it encompasses many peoples, languages, and creeds, and one size does not fit all. Having churches that primarily cater for specific cultures is not dividing the Body of Christ. To the contrary, it ensures everyone has

a sacred space where they can worship within the context of their own culture, and in their own language, and not somebody else's.

We have just had three consecutive significant Sundays in our Church calendar: the Sunday after Ascension, the Day of Pentecost, and Trinity Sunday. So it would be very easy to overlook the fact that today is also a very special Sunday for us.

Today is Te Pouhere Sunday, a very important date for the Anglican Church in this corner of the world. But a day that is not as well known as it ought to be. And I wouldn't mind betting that when most people first hear of Te Pouhere Sunday, they automatically assume it is day to celebrate something related to Māori. But that would only be telling part of the story. Although it is worth remembering that when the first Anglican service was held in this land, on Christmas Day back in 1814, it was conducted in Māori and for Māori. But I digress.

Te Pouhere Sunday is perhaps best described as Constitution Sunday. It is a day set aside by General Synod to commemorate the adoption of a new constitution, written in both English and Māori, of what from thence forth would be called the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and Polynesia in 1992. This replaced our previous constitution, which had been in place since 1857, when we became an autonomous Province of the Anglican Communion. I was not a practising Anglican, or indeed a member of any church community in 1992, but I do remember the adoption our new constitution being quite newsworthy. If only because it created our three Tikanga Church.

In our usage, Tikanga is perhaps best translated as cultural stream. Tikanga Pakeha, Tikanga Māori, and Tikanga Pasefika are three strands of our Church, each of which is a full partner that is empowered to exercise mission and ministry in its own cultural context, while remaining firmly rooted in our Anglican traditions. Each Tikanga has their own bishops and overlapping dioceses (or hui amorangi as they are called in Tikanga Māori). And each Tikanga is a full partner in the decision-making process of General Synod.

A thoroughly unfortunate, inaccurate, and inappropriate criticism that has been levelled at our Three Tikanga Church is that it is a racially segregated way of doing Church that is somewhat akin to apartheid, but this could not be further from the truth. Under South Africa's brutal apartheid regime, and during the days of enforced racial segregation in parts of the USA, people were forcibly kept apart on the basis of race, and it was only 50 years ago last week that the Supreme Court of the United States struck down the laws of some states that forbade interracial marriage.

Our Three Tikanga Church is nothing like this. Our Tikanga may be different expressions of Church for people from different cultures, but our Tikanga are not exclusive. Anyone is welcome to attend churches belonging to any of the Tikanga, regardless of their own cultural identity, and it is not unusual to see, for example Māori and Pacific people to worship in Tikanga Pakeha churches, like ours, or vice versa. And if you have not experienced worship any of our other Tikanga, I would encourage you to visit the beautiful Rangiatea Church in Otaki, a Tikanga Māori Church, which is only twenty minutes away on our new expressway.

In this morning's Second Lesson from the Acts of the Apostles, we heard how St Peter spoke to those assembled of how God shows no partiality to any particular people. St Peter, a Jew, was in Caesarea, and was speaking to a gathering of Gentiles, at a time when Jews were not supposed to mingle with Gentiles. Immediately before the events described in today's reading, St Peter had been sought by a Roman centurion named Cornelius, who is traditionally believed to have been the first Gentile convert to Christianity, and who had a vision in which he was told seek St Peter and ask him speak to him and his relatives and close friends. From the very beginning, the Church has sought to make itself inclusive and relevant to people from different cultures.

But back to our Three Tikanga. I like to see each Tikanga as a strand of a rope. Each strand on its own only has limited strength, but when twisted together we have a strong rope, which will hold firmly, on which we can anchor our faith in Jesus the Christ.

E kore e taea e te whenu kotahi ki te raranga i te whāriki kia māhiora
tōu ki tōu.

A strand of flax is nothing in itself but woven together is strong and enduring.

Darryl Ward

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