

+‘I he Huafa ‘o e Tamai mo e ‘Alo mo e Laumālie Mā‘oni‘oni.

Mālō e lelei, Kia ora tātou

I am extremely grateful to the Dean for the privilege of saying some words about what we are celebrating today.

I’m sure many of you know the Indian story of the six blind men and the elephant. Each blind man in turn felt the elephant and reported his view of what it was like. One felt the tail and said it must be a sort of rope, the second –its leg, and thought it was a tree, the third felt the side of the elephant and declared it was a wall. The fourth approached the elephant further forward, and feeling its ear said it was a fan; the fifth met the trunk, which he took to be a snake and the sixth encountered the tusks, and claimed to have found spears. The point of course, is that each from his own limited perspective could not gain an understanding of the whole.

We have just ended a sequence in the church’s year which focusses on the life of Our Lord, from birth, to his Passion and resurrection. Last week Sunday we dwelt on the mystery of the Trinity, God as Three-in-One, and now we settle down to what is called ordinary time, a series of about five months of regular worship, readings and teaching, culminating in our celebration of all the saints and of the Kingship of Christ before the new cycle begins again.

As an important first part of this time our attention is directed today to a document, the Pouhere, the Constitution of our church. As it happens yesterday (13th June) was the anniversary of the signing of the first constitution in 1857 at S. Stephen’s Church in Auckland, but it was fully revised and affirmed in 1992. The Māori term Pouhere is much richer

than the rather bland ‘constitution’, as it means the post to which something is anchored. Te Pouhere does much more than just set out how the church is administered; it is a document about the nature of our church both historically and in the present. It affirms our historical roots in the Church of England, whose own history stretches back to beyond the installation of St Augustine as 1st Archbishop of Canterbury in 597 to the Celtic church of the early centuries of the present era. It also stresses that in New Zealand, the Anglican church was initially a Māori church and that from its earliest times it was involved with missions to the Pacific. As many of you will be aware, the main innovation in the Pouhere was the definition of our church as consisting of three strands or Tikanga, Tikanga Pākehā consisting of the seven dioceses of NZ, Tikanga Māori – te Pīhopatanga o Aotearoa with its presiding bishop and four regional bishops, and Tikanga Pasifika – based in Suva, though providing ministry to many people within New Zealand as well. This model is the result of many decades of development towards arrangements in the church which better and better reflect its cultural diversity. In 1928, the first Bishop of Aotearoa was consecrated as an suffragan bishop in the diocese of Waiapu. It was not until 50 years later a degree of autonomy was conferred on the pīhopatanga, as it is called. In 1990 Polynesia became a full diocese beside the seven in New Zealand, and in 1992 the new constitution made both this new diocese and the pīhopatanga equal partners with the seven New Zealand dioceses. Of course the tikanga differ greatly in size, and even more so in resourcing, which is another story. But all are independent in their internal organisation, subject only to General synod and the Pouhere itself.

It is important to recognise that this did not create three distinct churches, nor does this way in which our church is now structured allow the view

that we can ignore the multiculturalism/multilingualism of our church because there is some other branch whose responsibility it is. On the contrary, the church's acknowledgement of its multiculturalism within its unity, makes it more than ever incumbent on us all not just to tolerate or even accept diversity, but to celebrate it.

As many of you know, I am a linguist. I am using this term not in the sense of someone who speaks a lot of languages, indeed accounts of what languages I can speak are often greatly exaggerated. Rather, a linguist is someone who studies the whole phenomenon of human language. Within this huge field, one of my areas of interest is minority languages. I want to talk a bit about the significance of languages, but much of what I say can be taken to be about cultures more generally. It has been plausibly predicted that within the next 100 years 90% of the world's roughly 7000 languages will disappear. Cynics might say that linguists are alarmed by this prospect because it would put us out of a job. However, the reasons why this is a matter of concern have to do with the importance of languages to their speakers and with the probable loss of rich data which provide windows into the diversity and depth of human experience and cognition.

It's often hard for people who are members of a majority culture and who speak a major language, particularly if they are monolingual, to understand quite how important people's languages are as part of their view of themselves. When a language is threatened or lost entirely through pressure from a major language, the effect on the self-esteem of the individuals for whom it is a central factor of identity can be devastating. The value of the ability to express oneself in one's own language and within one's own culture in a context which affirms these cannot be overestimated.

The *Bible* of course offers an explanation for the diversity of human language in the story of the Tower of Babel. Babel means ‘confusion’, and the story presents the view that diversity of language is an inhibiting, divisive state of affairs. However, the story of Pentecost which we heard read just a fortnight ago can be seen as the counterbalance to Babel. When Peter and the others preached they were understood by all the many people who had gathered from all over the Mediterranean for the Jewish festival. This came about however, not by the Spirit as it were undoing Babel, by making everyone understand Aramaic, but by showing that the Gospel is expressible and intelligible in all languages. Diversity is thus no longer divisive. Much of what else happens in Acts, as we have heard in this morning’s epistle, and much also of what S. Paul talks about in his letters, is to do with the mission to the gentiles, not making the gentiles Jewish, but by accepting diversity within the community of believers, an idea that was very hard for some Jewish believers to come to terms with.

But within cultural and linguistic communities, we are all of course unique individuals differing from each other in talents, temperament, personality, experience, background. Conversely, though despite cultural and linguistic differences, we are all the same. Our common humanity is in fact far greater than the ways, cultural, social, individual in which we are different. And among the ways in which we are the same is that whatever our language or culture these are inadequate for fully expressing some of our most fundamental experiences and feelings. This is why composers, poets, artists, philosophers, theologians are constantly striving to find new expressions of faith, beauty, love. But as Paul says, we continue to see through a glass darkly. This is however a place where human cultural and linguistic diversity can represent a real enrichment.

And this is the point at which I think the elephant story has relevance. Each of the blind men had a partial, incomplete picture, but together, they could provide from their different perspectives a less deficient view.

As many of you will realise, the Māori text which we are using in today's Eucharist is from the form of worship on pp.476ff. of the prayerbook. These pages give parallel texts in Māori and English. However, in many cases the two texts are not direct translations of each other, but correspond in spirit, using ways of speaking, metaphors, idioms, which are peculiar to each language.

One of the great things about the western liturgy which we have inherited from the Church of England, indeed from the wider western catholic tradition, is that once we are familiar with its structure, we know what's going on whatever the language. Ann and I have found this invaluable on our visits to Europe, where we have usually attended Roman Catholic worship variously in French and Spanish; the patterns are so familiar that it is possible to participate fully even with only limited knowledge of the language.

Languages and cultures are ways of dealing with and understanding the world, experience and life, and as such make available to all those who explore them and relish them new and enriching views and perspectives.

Today we celebrate the cultures and languages which are part of our church, and of our life together as a diverse yet unified worshipping and serving community.

He mea kōrero atu ki a koutou i runga i te ingoa o te Matua, o te Tama, o te Wairua Tapu. Āmine