God's work in the world – Te Pouhere Sunday

Today's gospel reading is an impassioned plea for the unity of the body of Christ, the Church. The length of the passage reflects the importance of the theme and, if we are honest about the Church, it is profoundly challenging.

We have been given God's glory, through Christ, so that we may be united as one, become completely one, with God and with one another. And, it is through this unity that the world will know that Christ was sent into the world to reveal the way of love and truth, love and truth to be reflected in us, both individually and collectively.

We, along with the rest of the world, are all too aware of many of the Church's failings, though we are probably not aware of nearly all of them! Most of the time we cannot, personally, do much about those failings. Our focus has to be on those things which we can do something about. We can work to ensure that our local church is as unified as possible. That here, we do care for and love one another.

We can also hold an awareness of the wider issues of unity that face the church. For our own, Anglican, denomination how do we express unity across such a diverse communion of churches. Again, there may be a limited amount that we can do but when we engage in conversations with others about our wider communion of Anglican provinces, do we speak with words of love and compassion or do we judge others for not being like us despite their different contexts.

The way that we speak tells of what is in our hearts. If it is the love of God that is in our hearts, our words will express care even when we disagree with others. This works at every level, whether considering the differences between denominations, provinces, diocese, congregations or even between members of our congregation.

Importantly, unity is not the same as uniformity. If we are to develop as a faith community and respond to the challenges of today, we need prophetic individuals who are able to see where God is at work and challenge the rest of us to join in that work. A unified community will recognise the value of such voices and confidently engage with what is being said. It then becomes a process of community discernment and God's guidance to find the appropriate response.

Reflecting on the many areas where we might be called to action, today our focus is on the relationships between the three tikanga, traditions, of our own province. We are not as actively engaged with the other tikanga as we have been. Yet, the reflections of those tikanga, particularly Tikanga Maaori, that are present seem to be becoming more naturally part of who we are. Perhaps, this is the work to which we are called at this time, to grow in confidence and gentle integration of diversity, to recognise the gifts of a diverse church that already exist in this community.

When we consider the lack of unity in the wider church, we cannot change the past, we cannot change much of the big picture, but we can change the experience of encounters

with our local church. In every encounter we have with another person we convey something of our values and priorities. We are in some small way proclaiming the gospel to the people we are with in every moment through one act of compassion at a time.

In our gospel passage Jesus refers repeatedly to the glory of God, a gift to him passed on to us. Nowhere does Saint John define what the Glory of God is. It might be a property of God, a gift from God, the result of obedience to God, our declaration of the greatness of God, or even all these things. We are left to make sense of it for ourselves. What is it about our lives and the life of our community that reveals the presence of the Glory of God?

The answer to this is many faceted. Just as each one of us is unique, so is everyone who encounters and engages with our church. For some people this will not be the right worshiping community. However, the diversity here means that we can be a welcoming and supportive place for many people where we can all discern our vocations, the paths that God has created specifically for each one of us.

I am not certain what the writers of our lectionary were thinking when they chose the passage from the prophet Isaiah for today. It is an appropriate passage but in a more complex way than we are used to.

It is about the vocation of Israel. Isaiah's was a controversial stance. First the Babylonians and now the Persians had taken over political rule of the people of Israel and land of

Palestine. This was not Israel's understanding of their covenant relationship with Yahweh Elohim. Most of Israel was convinced that God had deserted them.

Isaiah was of a very different opinion. Isaiah looked at all that was going on and knew God was at work. Much of Isaiah is hard to read. It is poetry with multiple voices, the distinctions between which are often lost in translation. Commentaries, very helpfully tend to put next to each part which voice is speaking and note where it is difficult to work out and whether this affects the interpretation.

For an added bonus, **both** the people of Israel and the Persian King are referred to as *'the servant of the Lord'*. Once we are aware of this, contest usually allows us to work out which *'servant of the Lord'* is being spoken of.

Our passage from the Acts of the Apostles tells us that today we, individually and collectively, may be considered *'the servant of the Lord'*. Isaiah's prophecy speaks to us

It is easy to think that the Church exists in an entirely hostile world. Yet a part of the call for unity in John's gospel is also a prayer for the protection of the Church. When we look at the Church we may wonder where that protection is. Yet, as with Isaiah, we must recognise that God is at work in the world in far larger ways than we imagine.

Isaiah saw no need for Israel to be self-governing in order to fulfil their calling. God could work through secular rulers to create the context in which the people of Isreal could

fulfil their covenant with Yahweh Elohim. Not having to concern themselves with government was to be seen as an opportunity and not a loss.

As the Western world becomes a largely post Christian society, we should be open to the opportunities that come with it. We are free to be a light to the world, loving and life-giving communities. We are free to be seekers of the truth growing into a deeper knowledge of the God who sent the Eternal Word into the world to dwell among us.

We do not belong to the world but we do live in the world. We live in God and God lives in us and sustains us but God also sustains the world and is at work in the world. We need prophets like Isaiah to help us to see where and how God is at work so that we might embrace those opportunities to be all that we are called to be.

At times it is hard to see where God is at work. But perhaps that is where a part of the Glory of God comes in. When we examine the life of those who have lived faithfully in the love of God, we see that their lives have brought light, life, and love to others. With humility, if we look at our own lives, we too may be able to recognise, that when we live faithfully, we too bring light, life and love to others.

This day and every day, may we all perceive the work of God in the world, the Glory of God in others, and may we bring light, life, and love to others that they may perceive the Glory of God in us. Amen. Amen.