

Pentecost Day - Sermon preached at the Cathedral of St John the Evangelist, Sunday 15 May 2016

BISHOP ANDREW HEDGE · TUESDAY, 17 MAY 2016

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be now and forever acceptable to you O God, our hope and our life. Amen.

Today we celebrate Pentecost; the feast of the fire, illuminating, encourager of faith; the feast of the one who came to be the advocate, to remind and help us re-member Jesus; the feast of the one who blows in strange ways, at strange times, in strange places. The Holy Spirit is the completion of the image of God we have come to know as the trinity. There at the beginning of all creation, the breath that brought life, the spirit that continues to move and shape the church.

Today we might reimagine ourselves amidst the stories that recount the work of the spirit in the life of the church, revealed with tongues of fire, understanding in the cacophony of a multitude of voices and language, a breathing wind that roars with the power of all creation. We expect to hear these stories again, and perhaps we come with our own intimate stories of experiences with the Holy Spirit that we add into the picture of how God continues to be revealed into this world.

We may describe experiences of the Holy Spirit moving among us in our community of faith or in individual prayer, through many means ... wisdom, deep inner peace, warmth, discernment, courage, and the list goes on. These are reflections of how the reality of God's love becomes real to us in our lives. Today though, as important all these experiences are, I want to talk about another sort of experience, a personal one that paints a different picture of God's spirit at work. This is my experience that was shared in the company of others last week during General Synod/Te Hīnota Whānui.

First of all let me talk a little about General Synod/Te Hīnota Whānui and then I want to share a bit more about how God's grace was expressed in the life of the synod in a way that I hadn't experienced before and I think was a first for many in Tikanga Pakeha.

General Synod/Te Hīnota Whānui was held here in Napier from Friday 6 May until Thursday 12 May. Of course we gathered here last Sunday for our opening Eucharist. The General Synod/Te Hīnota Whānui was a gathering of about 130 people from all over our province. All the Dioceses and Amorangi were represented. We came together, met in prayer, worship, over meals and spent most of our time debating a variety of issues. All in all, we worked for about 100 hours together over the week. One issue in particular, the response to the reception of the 'A Way Forward Working Group Report', has grabbed the attention of the wider church and public view in the past few days ... and rightly so. I'll come to that soon, but there are a host of other topics that were discussed that were worthy of wider knowledge.

Among them were the heightened calls to action over Climate Change. With powerful stories of the evidence of Climate Change causing dramatic changes to our brothers and sisters in Polynesia ... 5 islands now gone undersea ... it was hard not to be moved to action in prayer, in solidarity. Life has to be more than just existing! Similar calls echoed forth in very practical means ... carbon credits for one ... that can make a difference in a very small way multiplied thousands of times over and change the world. In a related string of motions we were also called to greater levels of organization and action in response to natural disasters in our province. It seemed so apt sitting in Ahuriri looking across toward Westshore and seeing the effects of the Hawke's Bay earthquake of 1931 that we thought about what more could be done to support our church across times of natural disaster.

We also looked at our liturgical life and debated the idea of changing our confirmation liturgy and making the baptism liturgy easier to follow. We couldn't make a decision on that and decided that we needed more time to consider it carefully over the next two years. We'll have a look at that later this year at our Diocesan Synod.

Of course that wasn't the only topic that we decided to leave on the table. In 2014 General Synod/Te Hīnota Whānui passed a motion, Motion 30, which has been highly regarded as reflecting a moment in the life of the church when God's spirit moved among the members of the synod, some clarity was revealed and thoughts of a way of dealing with different opinions in the church about the blessing of same-sex marriages. This wasn't the only issue at stake in this motion though, as there were also

high hopes that some clarity of how we accept members of the LGBTI community into the life of the church in the blessing of marriages could also have helped us to be clearer about the full acceptance of LGBTI clergy in our church. Since 2014 there has been a working group and it was the report of this group that we had to receive and endorse or do something else with. We decided to do something else. We decided to let it lie on the table of Synod, which means that when we return to meet again in 2018 the same report will be there.

It sounds lightweight to make that summary in just a few sentences and it is not a realistic reflection of the length of time we spent on dealing with this report ... it took us the best part of three days of discussion. It also sounds lightweight to say that all we have decided to do is let the report lie on the table of Synod. We've done more than that and I want to talk about that soon, but before I get there I want to take some time to recognize the huge levels of grief that this decision represents for many in and out of the church who have worked, prayed and longed for the full inclusion of the LGBTI community in the life of the church. In 2011 our Synod made a clear declaration in support of the blessing of same-sex relationships and in support of LGBTI clergy. Waiapu has been part of education on understanding issues of sexuality within a theological and ecclesiological framework for the past two decades. It has been a long piece of work, and when we couldn't bring about the beginnings of change by endorsement of the report and related liturgies for the blessing of civil marriage ... well, we wept ... genuine sadness and frustration, disappointment and grief.

However, the experience of General Synod/Te Hīnota Whānui on this debate showed us that the majority of the church is ready to find a way to move ahead on this issue. In General Synod/Te Hīnota Whānui we often discuss issues between tikanga. What became clear to everyone on the debate of this motion was that Tikanga Polynesia and Tikanga Maori had decided in their caucuses that they were ready to move ahead, to find a way through the recommendations of the report that would lead us toward blessing of same-sex civil marriages. But Tikanga Pakeha was not able to come to an agreement. We struggled and struggled and struggled.

So, we were heading toward the motion that would endorse the report being lost. That would mean that all the work over the past four years or so would be lost and we'd be retracing our steps through history to find a place to begin it all again. That was until we (now thinking as all of Pakeha, not just Waiapu) experienced a powerful expression of the aroha of our tikanga partners. Both Tikanga Polynesia and Tikanga Maori came to us and told us that they could see and hear our struggle and offered to manaaki us through the reception of the report. Manaakitanga is a difficult thing to describe and it would be fair to say that most Pakeha had to quickly learn a lot about what this gift meant in that context. The main point is that while Tikanga Maori and Tikanga Polynesia said to us we will manaaki you now, we will walk alongside you through this while you struggle to come to agreement ... you need to know that we won't be taken advantage of, that action must take place next General Synod/Te Hīnota Whānui in 2018. That is for me the action of the Holy Spirit at work. It is an action that recognizes that things are moving in a direction of change but acknowledging that the detail and nature of that change is unclear, the movement ahead requires support, awhi, tautoko, encouragement, but that this work must be done with a timeframe in mind. We are moving ... change is coming.

It is hard to describe the level of strength that Tikanga Polynesia and Tikanga Maori offered to General Synod/Te Hīnota Whānui on this issue. The strength they have given comes at a cost not only for them by virtue of their commitment and decision to delay their own hopes, but also the cost for all others whose hopes have been diminished by the delay. The gift that it provides is that now work is focused clearly on those on the church who find the blessing of same-sex civil marriages to not be consonant with their understanding of scripture and ecclesiology. It is their perspective that must now step forward with clarity of detail to participate in the process for change. It is past time for positioning around broad statements. Now it is time for clarity on how we can somehow stick together or even separate in the church.

These are the realities of our life as a church that were discussed; realities that now sit with the House of Bishops to provide leadership on for the church; realities that also brought with them a deep sense of anguish and grief at what may be expressed through the painful tears of those who don't agree with the report and don't want to leave.

How will the church relate to one another in a few years? What will the church look like in a few years? These are all issues that will be shaped significantly in the next year as a new working group looks seriously at the detail of how the church can hold integrities together. Manaakitanga has been a gift for the church. It is a gift that requires nothing in return and yet the way we handle this gift will speak volumes for who we are in the community of the church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. Perhaps that's a way of looking at the gifts of the Holy Spirit as well ... requiring nothing in return ... and yet the way we handle the gifts speaks volumes for our life as a community.

Sometimes its hard to see God's work amongst us ... sometimes we need to sit for a long time without clarity ... sometimes the expectations of the world are not the wisdom of God ... sometimes others come alongside us unexpectedly and respond to our struggle with aroha ... In all these things we remember that there is a place for us at the Eucharist ... the centrality of our faith ... at which all are welcome ... all are equal ... all are wrapped up into the mystery of God's persevering love.