



## Remembering a Radical History

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Year B, Te Pouhere

2 Corinthians 5:14-19, Matthew 7: 24-29

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In gathering together my thoughts for today I will admit to having spent some time resisting my worst impulses when it comes to the celebration of Te Pouhere Sunday. It feels a little self-indulgent of the church that we have set aside a Sunday every year to reflect on how we have come to arrange our life, because that is what the name Te Pouhere refers to, our Anglican constitutional arrangements. As you can tell from that last sentence, there is a certain critical perspective I bring to this day. But rather than waste time focussing on Anglican shortcomings, I am going to jump straight to some aspects of the Te Pouhere story that are often overlooked, misunderstood, and might even inspire us to be a different kind of institution. I say that, because while we often think of the church as slow moving to the point of being stuck in the past, when we look at the history of Anglicanism in this part of the world, what we discover is a history of radical change.

When Bishop Selwyn first came to Aotearoa New Zealand in 1842 he was in many respects part of the English colonial agenda. The expectation of the Church of England was that Selwyn would establish a little Church of England here in this land with all its various trappings intact. What the English church had not bargained on was that Selwyn, while traditional in some respects, was also something of a reformer. He like many others, left Britain due to a sense of dissatisfaction with the old world. He harboured ambitions to do things differently. To put that another way, Selwyn quietly had a radical agenda of his own.

Firstly, Selwyn wanted to separate the church from royal and political power, so that the church could be an independent voice within the community. This way the church could be free to

challenge injustice, unencumbered by obligations to the state. Selwyn believed that the Church of England was unable to do this effectively, and therefore wanted to explore what a church separated from the state might be able to do.

Secondly, Selwyn began to experiment with models of synodical governance, meaning that Selwyn wanted a democratic church where bishops, clergy, and lay people were all given an equal say in all matters. This was a massive revision of the English system which was governed by a small handful of clergy and a number of English lords. When Selwyn led the process to create the first constitution of this church in 1857, he successfully achieved both of these things, a church separated from the state with a far more democratic structure. While the church was still hierarchical in nature, his attempt at flattening the hierarchy of the church was a significant move away from what had gone before.

These moves caused a fair amount of controversy in their time. Some in England felt that Selwyn's choices were treasonous. But in time, Selwyn's reforms were picked up by other Anglican provinces, because the radical choices he encouraged in this part of the world, were the right ones. He encouraged this church to dare to be different and blaze a new pathway, that others ultimately chose to follow.

Now if this recounting of history is sounding a little rose tinted, let me balance the scales a little. As it happened when the first constitution of the church in this province was being debated there were possibilities for even more radical change that did not come to pass at that time. The first was the inclusion of women in the new church structures. This was discussed in the synods of the 1850's. However it was not until the 1920's that the first lay women were included in roles of church governance. This was followed by another long wait for even greater inclusion of women which came in the 1970's with the ordination of women to the priesthood. Here I note that the women ordained in this

country were among the first women priests in the world. Another important piece of radical history. It is fair to suggest that while that first constitution fell short of including women, the radical nature of it helped later generations make more room for more people.

The other missed opportunity in the debates of the 1850's was the clearly expressed desire of Tikanga Māori for an autonomous indigenous Anglican church. That dream would not be realised for another 133 years, when the church rewrote Selwyn's constitution to create the Three Tikanga Church. That too was a radical new direction. Selwyn moved the church away from the state and put bishops clergy and lay people on equal footing. The new constitution gave that equality to Pākehā, Māori, and Pacifica people. With each step on this journey more people have been included, the hierarchy flattened a little more, and greater equality has been reached for.

Being radical was never the aim of any of the people who contributed to this history. True radicals are the people who dare to think that things could be better and also have the courage, when the opportunity arises, to try something new. They do so because God is always challenging us to look to the margins, to consider those whose needs are not being met, and to respond with love. God reminds us over and over again, that there is an ongoing need to reach beyond our comfort, to be always unsatisfied with the status quo, because when we fall into complacency it is always the most vulnerable who bear the cost.

So that's the history lesson. But history lessons are not simply about recalling the past, they are also an opportunity for us to learn and ask questions. One question this history lesson asks us, is how are we to be radical now? How are we to be part of this story which reminds us that no matter how well we think we are doing, there are others waiting to be welcomed. Those who want to participate. Those who want to be treated with equality and dignity.

More than that, I think the question of how are we going to be radical today, is a good one for the people of this community. St Matthew-in-the-City has its own radical history. This is the place in which the dream of an Auckland City Mission was first imagined. Protests against apartheid were planned here. Various billboards have dared to say to the wider community, you might think you know how Christians think about these things...but we beg to differ. There are many more points in this history that should be remembered and celebrated. And yet, they do not answer the question before us, how are we to be radical today? How are we to be radical today?

It's at this point that you might like me to offer some answers to that rhetorical question. But rhetorical questions are not meant to be answered. They are meant to provoke us, or at the very least, they want us to think for ourselves. The question of where God might be calling us to next is not one for me to answer alone. But I want us to think about it. I want us to ponder how we might dare to be different, how we might reach beyond the walls of this building, and share something surprising, something radical, with the wider community we are a part of. Amen.