

I want to offer you this well-known whakatauki because I think it reflects what we find at the heart of Scripture, the focus of God's love:

*He aha te mea nui o te ao?
He tangata, he tangata, he tangata*

What is the most important thing in the world?
It is people, it is people, it is people.

We acknowledge today the opening of the first church in 1925 and its dedication by Archbishop Averill. I note an early entrepreneurial spirit that was present in the parish. They hadn't been able to build a vestry room at first and so the bishop had to get vested in the church porch. The following year he received a letter from the parish inviting the diocese to make a contribution to that improvement. Can I just say how pleasant the building is today, and how comfortable I have been in the space provided for me to prepare for worship.

Anyway, it's now for me not to recount memories and history but to help us think in a more focused way about the weaving of God's life and presence through it all.

The original church was lost to fire in 1990 and this new building began its life in 2000. But as your history records, there was life before there was a church building with local people gathering where they could for worship and fellowship, occasionally joined by visiting clergy.

It's really easy at an anniversary to focus on the buildings and celebrate that. But today we are here in thankful remembrance of the people who came together in order to offer worship to God as Anglicans in the community of Huapai and have continued to do so through all these years, with or without a building to do so. In all the different ways of being church, in two different church buildings, and during building and rebuilding, what has remained constant has been the worship of God and the community life that has formed as a result.

The source of that community is God, and the union God seeks with humanity, God's desire to be with us. So close a union in fact that Jesus imagines it like fruit on a vine. That's a good image for a church in this part of Auckland, and I note that your centenary dinner was held at a vineyard. I don't pretend to know much about viticulture, in fact I'm not much of a gardener at all. But I have watched the odd episode of "Under the Vines" and I'm capable of drinking a glass or two of what results, so take that as you will.

The word that Jesus continues to emphasise is "abide."

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

As we think about the heart of church life being the community of people that comes together to form the church, this idea of abiding suggests to us that community life is something we have to continue to work at. It suggests that it's not enough to just put our name in the roll, and turn up and sit quietly at the back and slip out during the final hymn (sorry I'm not picking on those at the back – it's full today so you had no choice).

Jesus calls forth from us a willingness and commitment to give of ourselves to one another, to offer hospitality to newcomers, to care for one another in our times of need, to encourage one another in our faith, to create a place of real belonging.

And none of that is dependent on any one person, not Helen, nor any of the other licensed ministers. It's something that we do together, and it is possible because this community life is founded in Jesus Christ. We are to abide in Christ who is the one who then brings forth the fruit which is the sign of God's boundless, endless life which holds us together.

When we have a good experience of belonging like that, we can easily take it for granted. I've been interested to read and think about social cohesion a bit this year. I've been aware of the increasing labelling and "othering" of groups and peoples, heightened levels of intolerance and fear of difference, and in what I see as a retreating by people into more narrow spheres of belonging and interaction which feel like safe places for people.

Some research earlier this year on social cohesion put a bit of data around my observations. Whereas most people have a positive sense about being in this nation, the experience of belonging in local communities was much weaker with only 53% of respondents feeling there was a strong sense of community where they live. Community participation is low with only 30% of people engaged in social clubs or religious groups that bring them into contact with people outside their familiar places of belonging, their family, friends or workplace.

I wonder how those experiences might be reflected in people living in the communities of Huapai and Kumeu and surrounds, and in the other places from where we have come today? I suspect that in places where there is a more defined geographical community a sense of belonging can be stronger than in suburban life in a city. But not necessarily so, and we should never assume that *our* strong sense of belonging in a friendly community means that everyone experiences it the same. Loneliness and isolation are two of the great enemies of humanity.

It's good to remind ourselves that it is people who build communities, and social cohesion comes about where people make a determined effort to establish neighbourhoods where the potential barriers of ethnicity, economic status, faith and politics are not an impediment for inclusion and belonging, and where each person makes a conscious effort to live beyond themselves and so to contribute to their community in ways that build its cohesive fabric.

I think that such commitments are an important aspect of kingdom building as we proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ who came to break down the barriers that divide – male and female, Jew and Greek, slave and free.

How will we demonstrate that through the life of the church? Because the fruit that Jesus looks for is not only the integrity of the community life of the gathered church and our sense of belonging together, or otherwise the church can run the risk of becoming another narrow place of “safe” belonging for like-minded people.

This fruit is also our commitment and capacity to reach out in love and welcome to others and to contribute well to the cohesion of the wider community in which we are placed. How do we contribute to the common good of Huapai and Kumeu and surrounds simply to play our part in strengthening cohesion without it necessarily returning any benefit directly to us?

God sends us to make a difference. Not just to be nice people, but to be bearers of the good news of Jesus to others, to be people who give generously of the love of God to others as a result, in what we say and what we do, in how we care and the compassion it reveals. That’s how we play our part in allowing God’s reign to become more real.

Thankfulness today then for this place and all it represents, but more so thankfulness for one another and for all who have gone before us. Our community life has been formed and moulded by our encounter with God and with the love of God that comes to us through Jesus Christ the Risen One, who welcomes us and abides with us, and who sends us out to proclaim and live the reign of God.

“He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata.”

“Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

*Bishop Ross Bay
28 September 2025
St Chad’s Huapai centenary service*