

We Didn't Start the Fire

7 June 2026, Te Pouhere Sunday): Reflection on Acts 10:34-43 and Matthew 7:24-29

-Tristan Sullivan-Vaughan

Who here is familiar with the Billy Joel Song, 'We didn't start the fire?'

Some of you probably know that Billy Joel came up with the idea for that song, when, as a 40-year-old man, he encountered a 21-year-old, who declared it was a terrible time to be 21 in 1989! And it turned out the unnamed young man didn't know about most of the things that had happened during Billy Joel's younger years. Nothing happened in the 1950s.

Our reading from Acts today comes straight after the story of Cornelius the Centurion. I'm sure many of you are familiar with it, but for those of you who aren't. Cornelius was a Roman centurion from the Italian Cohort. From what Historians can deduce about this, the 'Italian Cohort' was a prestigious military unit made up of volunteers from the Italian peninsula. This is significant because this makes Cornelius culturally quite alien from Peter. He received an Angelic vision with a request that Cornelius send men to Joppa to bring Peter to meet him, which he does.

While on their journey, Peter receives a vision in which he is hungry and presented with animals that are regarded as unclean in Judaism. God tells Peter to eat. Peter protests that he has never eaten anything unclean, seemingly thinking this is a test. But the voice in the vision tells him 'what God has made clean, you must not call profane'.

Peter then reaches the house of Cornelius and openly associates with him in ways seen as improper under Jewish teaching of the time. Peter had interpreted his vision as meaning that no **person** can be called profane or unclean. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality" he tells them, "but in every people anyone who fears God and practices righteousness is acceptable to God".

This is a seismic shift in the way that God was known. God was for everyone. And our ancestors in faith took that story and they ran with it and delivered that to every corner of the ancient world, from India to Britannia and from Armenia to Aksum.

And wherever the Gospel travelled, the Church took on slightly different ways of doing things – God was no longer specifically Jewish and practices changed with the cultures God's Word broke into. Circumcision stopped. Jewish dietary restrictions were abandoned. In the 4th century the Bible was translated from Greek into Latin for the people of the Western Roman Empire. Numerous different rites, which is to say rituals, prayers and practices,

sprung up all around the Christian world. In Christian Britain, where our Anglican way of doing things originates from, there were Celtic rites, which were replaced in the Middle Ages by a variety of other rites. Durham, Herefordshire, York, Scotland and Salisbury all had their own way of doing things that worked for the people in those places.

This adaption of the Church into different places was not some concerning breach of true religion, but a way of Christ's Church building into the bedrock of contemporary culture – building on rock rather than sand. It was how it made its way of doing things meaningful for the specific group of people it was speaking to at that moment in time.

Then in 1549, the Early Anglican Church got its own book of Common Prayer that split us away from the way things were being done in the Roman Church. It was radical, different and it was in English rather than Latin – suitable for the people and culture the Church was speaking into at that point in time.

It was revised in 1559 and then again in 1662. Some of you might remember the 1662 liturgy. In the mid-19th century, the Oxford Movement brought us the vestments we are familiar with now.

In 1928 the Church of England Empowering Act made it possible for our Church, here in Aotearoa NZ to start making changes to our way of doing things – changes that worked for us, here in these islands. In 1988 we first published the New Zealand Prayer Book. The Big Red Liturgy book that we now work from.

So, what does all of this have to do with Te Pouhere Sunday? And Billy Joel?

As I am sure most of you are aware, today we are celebrating the day, 34 years ago, when the General Synod of the Anglican Church in New Zealand established a constitution that created the 'three Tikanga' organisational structure of the Church as we know it now. Tikanga translates as 'the right, or proper way of doing thing' – something I've spoken about already.

I have sometimes heard people grumbling that the way the Church is organised now is in some way novel or unusual. Some kind of strange modern act of sacrilegious deregulation that allows all sorts of weird heresies to spring up. I can't help but feel that these people are a little bit like the 21-year-old man that inspired Billy Joel's song, imagining that the world sat in stasis until their arrival.

I gave you my brief history of the Church from Peter's proclamation at the House of Cornelius through to today to illustrate how, actually, the Three Tikanga structure of our church today is beautifully in line with the way Christianity has been practiced for millennia. The Anglican people who sit in the pews today are not the same as the people who met at the House of Cornelius, nor the Early Church communities in the Western Roman Empire, nor the Medieval people of England, nor the first Protestant reformers. Our way of doing things, our Tikanga, has shifted and evolved to remain meaningful for specific peoples in specific places in time.

And within the Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia, the congregation at Te Ana Tapu – Holy Sep, is not the same as the congregation here in the Tikanga Pakeha church of St John's in Royal Oak, nor are either of us the same as the congregation of Holy Trinity Cathedral in Suva or All Saints in Apia. We all have our unique cultures and our unique tikanga. And that's okay. That's more than okay as each one of these tikanga reveals Christ in a unique way that you can't find anywhere else.

We each catch the Light of Christ and reflect it back, but differently, revealing new dimensions we could not conceive of on our own.

And that is something I would like to suggest is one of the great things our church has to offer. Because each of these Revelations gives us a lens to critique our own Tikanga and consider how we might be able to do things differently, consider how we might modify our own ways of doing things to better connect with the people we are being called to speak to at this moment in time.

These might be big ideas about the nature of God or very small things. Personally, I enjoy a lot of the chanting that is present within some of the Tikanga Māori services I have been exposed to.

And through Tikanga Pasifika, I have discovered the metaphor of Coconut Christology, originally from Tongan methodism. Christ is compared to a coconut that falls from the tree – descends from heaven and dies, but then the shell cracks – the bonds of death are broken, and the coconut sprouts new life! It's a powerful metaphor and one you couldn't find anywhere else

There is a richness and depth to what our tikanga partners are doing and this gives us the opportunity to see Christ in ways we could never have conceived of is right there.

Doubtless what we have today is a million miles from what the first Missionaries and Kaiwhakaako would have imagined the Anglican Church - the Haahi Mīhinare, would become. We didn't start the fire. But that is the way Christianity grows. Let us give thanks to God for what God has made with us to speak to the people of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia at this moment in time.