

My brothers and sisters in Christ, today we gather to give thanks to God for the gift of Suzanne Aubert to the Church and to Aotearoa New Zealand. We give thanks for the Sisters of Compassion whom she founded, and for the generations of women who have carried forward her charism of loving and practical service. And we give thanks for the countless people whose lives were touched by her care. It is right that the bishops of New Zealand are gathered here today with the Sisters of Compassion and all of you. Together we stand in thanksgiving for a woman whose life belongs not simply to one congregation, one diocese, or one period of our history. Meri Hohepa belongs to the story of the Church in this land – and increasingly, to the story of Aotearoa New Zealand itself.

In the first reading, Isaiah speaks of a vineyard. The owner carefully prepares the ground. He clears it, plants it, protects it and gives it everything necessary to flourish. And yet, when the time comes for the harvest, the vineyard produces something other than what was hoped for. The image of the vineyard is ultimately an image of God's people. God has planted us, nurtured us and entrusted us with the care of one another. The Gospel takes up the same image. Jesus speaks of a vineyard entrusted to tenants. The question is not simply whether the vineyard exists. The question is what the tenants do with what has been entrusted to them.

That is a question that can be asked of every generation: What will we do with what has been entrusted to us? Suzanne Aubert gives us a remarkable answer. She understood that faith wasn't something to be kept within the walls of a church. Faith is shown in the way we treat people, especially those whom society could overlook or

forget. She understood that the vineyard of God's kingdom included the poor, the sick, the orphan, the elderly, the abandoned and those living on the margins. And she went to them.

The second reading from St Paul gives us a beautiful description of Christian living:

*"Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious... think about these things."* And then Paul says something equally important: *"Keep on doing what you have learnt and received."* That is very much the spirituality of Suzanne Aubert. Her faith wasn't merely something she believed. It was something she did. She prayed, and then she acted. She saw suffering, and she responded. She encountered people who were poor, sick, abandoned or in need, and she didn't simply ask why their circumstances had come about. She asked what can I do for them? That practical compassion became one of the great marks of her life.

From the early days of her ministry in Auckland, Hawkes Bay, Hiruhārama on the Whanganui River, and eventually here in Wellington, Suzanne continually crossed boundaries. She crossed geographical boundaries, cultural boundaries and social boundaries. She went where the need was. And she did so because she believed that Christ was already there.

There is something particularly significant about the name by which she came to be known here - Meri Hohepa. Suzanne Aubert became deeply immersed in the life of the tangata whenua of this country. She learned te reo Māori. She lived among

Māori communities. She developed relationships of trust and friendship. She came to understand something of the spiritual richness of the people among whom she served.

Her life reminds us that Christian mission is not simply about bringing something to people. It is also about receiving, listening, learning, becoming a neighbour, and recognising the presence of God already at work in another culture and other people. That's an important reminder for us today. Meri Hohepa's story speaks to our continuing journey of being a Church that listens, that learns, that walks alongside others, and that recognises the dignity and mana of every person.

We can't celebrate Suzanne Aubert without giving thanks for the Sisters of Compassion. A charism becomes truly alive when it passes from one generation to another. For 134 years, the Sisters have continued to place compassion at the heart of their mission. They have cared for people who were sick, accompanied families, served children and those who were vulnerable. They have stood alongside people whom others have ignored. And today, in the Sisters here we see something very precious, the living memory of Suzanne Aubert. Here are women who have given their lives to the same Gospel conviction - that every person is worthy of love, dignity and care because every person is beloved of God. So today we say to the Sisters - thank you. Thank you for keeping alive the charism of Meri Hohepa, for your prayer, your service, the sacrifices that have often gone unseen. And thank you for reminding the Church that compassion is not an optional extra to Christian faith. It is at the very heart of the Gospel.

But today shouldn't simply be an occasion for looking backwards. The centenary of Suzanne Aubert's death invites us to look forward. What does Meri Hohepa have to say to New Zealand in 2026? Our society has changed enormously since she died. Yet there remain people who are poor, who are lonely, children who need protection and care, families under pressure. There remain elderly people who can feel forgotten, migrants and refugees seeking belonging. and people whose lives are marked by illness, disability, addiction or poverty. There are people living on the margins of our society who can easily become invisible.

The witness of Suzanne Aubert remains remarkably contemporary. She asks us - who is being overlooked? Who needs someone to stand beside them? Who needs not simply a service, but a relationship? Who needs to know that they are valued? Her answer was never simply to talk about compassion. She practised it. That is why her witness speaks not only to Catholics, but to wider New Zealand society. Her life challenges us to resist a culture in which people can become statistics, cases, problems or burdens. Meri Hohepa saw persons. And because she saw persons, she saw Christ.

The Gospel tells us that the vineyard has been entrusted to us. Suzanne Aubert has finished her earthly work. The Sisters who followed her have carried the charism forward. But the vineyard is now in our hands. What will we do with it? The Church has been entrusted with a Gospel of mercy. We have been entrusted with the poor, the vulnerable, with young people and families, those who are lonely and those who have lost hope. The temptation is to think that someone else will take care of

these things. But the life of Suzanne Aubert tells us otherwise. Faith requires us to roll up our sleeves, to cross the road. Faith requires us to notice, listen, and to care.

We gather today conscious that the Church has recognised in Suzanne Aubert a life of heroic Christian virtue. She is Venerable. That title doesn't mean that she belongs safely in the past. The Church is holding her up before us as someone whose life points towards Christ. Her greatness was not found in seeking greatness. It was found in small acts of love repeated faithfully over many years. She prayed, served, persevered, cared. And she trusted God. Perhaps that is one of the most important things she has to say to us today.

We don't need to know exactly what the future will bring. St Paul tells us in our second reading *"There is no need for you to be anxious about anything; pray about everything."* And then *"And the God of peace will be with you."* Suzanne Aubert lived that trust. She faced difficulties that would have discouraged many people. Yet she continued. She trusted that God would provide. She trusted that compassion could make a difference. She trusted that no act of love offered in Christ's name is ever wasted.

So today, in this church where her funeral was celebrated one hundred years ago, we give thanks for Meri Hohepa, Suzanne Aubert. We give thanks for the Sisters of Compassion and every person who has carried her work forward. And we give thanks for the people whose lives have been changed because one woman decided to take the Gospel seriously.

But our thanksgiving must become mission. The best way to honour Suzanne Aubert is not simply to remember her, it is to continue what she began. We do this not simply because it is socially desirable, but because we believe that Christ is present in the person before us.

One hundred years ago, this church was filled with people mourning the death of Meri Hohepa. Today, this church is filled with people giving thanks for her life. May the next chapter of her story be written not only in books and commemorations, but in the lives of people who choose to live the same Gospel of compassion. May her witness continue to inspire the Church. May it continue to speak to our society. And may God grant that, like Suzanne Aubert, we might one day be able to say that we have used faithfully the vineyard entrusted to us.