It is a great joy to gather here at Blockhouse Bay, one of the places where the friars first put down their roots in New Zealand. It is a place from where the life of both friars and sisters has flourished. We gather around the statue of our brother Dominic, right arm raised and finger pointed: confident, preaching, imparting light and truth. Why are we here? Very simply to celebrate the fact that it is now 800 years since Dominic’s vision of bringing light and living the truth of the gospel was approved by Pope Honorius III as an authentic way of life. It helped bring people of his time to God. Eight hundred years later, there’s still vitality and promise that this way will continue! It is a tribute to the significance of Dominic’s work and the power of the Word proclaimed ever since by the Dominican Family.

Dominic is so attractive as a person. Chrys McVey put it so simply: “Dominic wept and the Order was born.” Yes, we remember those early years when he was a 20 year old student at the university in Palencia. He was still maturing as a human being. Yet he was strong and confident enough to sell his precious books. The proceeds he gave to those who were suffering terrible hunger from recurring drought. We remember Dominic’s impulsive nature: dispersing the first group of friars on the feast of the Assumption 1217 from Prouilhe to the then known four corners of the Earth: Madrid, Paris, Bologna, and Rome: only 16 men in total, sent out against their better judgment. “Hoarded grain rots” growled Dominic, and he would brook no opposition. His tiny, fledgling Order flourished as a result of his daring. We remember the brethren at Santa Sabina who spied on Dominic at night in the basilica at prayer (this peephole still exists!), and listened to him weeping, crying out to God on behalf of people in need of help - that compassion speaks volumes to us still, doesn’t? And we remember his generosity: coming to the San Sisto monastery, just down the hill from Santa Sabina, with wine; coming late at night, calling the sisters together, and giving them this gift. How some of them must have cursed him as they sipped their delicious wine! But it was done out of joyful thanks. They had responded to his call for reform and renewal in accordance with the wishes of Pope Honorius III.

All this speaks to me of a humble attractive man, a youthful and highly gifted man, inspired by the gospel and continually searching to be of use to others in their search for God. As Simon Tugwell has so trenchantly put it. “[Dominic’s] life was shaped by the needs of others.” We salute this man for his courage and irrepressible energy.

Let us not forget a simple fact: the Order was not born neatly, easily and in one piece. No, Dominic struggled. What we now call the Order of Preachers came to be out of many slowly growing and converging ideas and movements. Dominic leaned on others and learned from them. He was not ashamed to pinch their ideas. What finally resulted was Dominic’s answer to the puzzle of renewal and transformation sorely needed within the Church: the mission of preaching the gospel to ordinary people in a way that was attractive and compelling.

Who and what were these influences? The first were the values and spirituality imprinted on Dominic by his saintly parents, Jane of Aza and Felix de Guzman. Then came the enormous influence of Bishop Diego who saw the potential of the adolescent Dominic, and drew him into the Cathedral chapter at Osma. It was Diego who around 1206 saw that taking up the pattern of the life of the apostles was necessary. It was the only way that the local people in Southern France, mesmerized by the Cathar movement and their simple gospel lifestyle, would become interested in the Catholic faith again.

Diego, too, set Dominic on the path of confronting the Cathars, leading them back from the strange dualistic denial of the goodness of our bodies which underlay their whole moral and spiritual life. To us, Catharism seems odd and very unappealing. To the ordinary people of that time, Catharism came as a something new, drawing them together against the introspective tiredness of a wealthy Church that had lost its way.

It was Bishop Diego who helped our brother set up at Prouilhe what became in fact the first monastery of nuns; and to involve lay people in the preaching of the gospel. When we look back now, we see the humble beginnings of the Dominican Family!

Then Bishop Fulk of Toulouse saw that there was need of an institute of preachers within his Diocese, one set up independently of parishes and just for the preaching of the Gospel. When Dominic took up this initiative around 1215, men were attracted to him and the Order was present in embryo. But it was Dominic’s insight alone to see that this group needed to be part of a much bigger picture than just a diocesan group.

Two Popes, Innocent and Honorius, men of vision, saw the genius of this international venture that was slowly being hatched. They gave their seal of approval to what Dominic had put together gradually and with the help of so many others.

This is not to belittle Dominic’s part and full measure in the beginnings of the Order. Rather it is to highlight how skillfully Dominic moved in the power of the Spirit to give to the Church a new way of preaching the gospel which flourishes still, and which bears his name.

By chance, today is the feast of St Albert the Great (happy feast, Carmel). Albert was one of our great early scientists, with a huge interest in nature and the environment. One interesting detail: Albert was the first person we know of ever to draw the wing formation of a bird, a falcon – trying to discern what makes a bird fly. Later, Michelangelo took up this interest. Is it too farfetched to see in this drawing the beginning of aeronautics, airplanes and space flight? Whatever, I am sure that if Albert were here, his love of nature would drive him to be in the vanguard of things environmental - to be preaching the need for a change of heart in relation to our earth and its profound interconnected needs with humanity now. He would be a member of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), wouldn’t he? And be present at the watershed Paris conference later this month.

Both Dominic and Albert discerned what their times needed and responded with courage and deep insight. That is their gift to us: can we put on the mind and eyes of these two men? to have the compassion of Dominic and the intellect of Albert and to respond as courageously? Cardinal Villot called Dominic a man who was “stupefyingly free”. We began this liturgy by placing T-lights around the statue of Dominic, invoking this man who was, as we say in our daily prayer, a “light to the Church and teacher of Truth”. Now we ask God, through Dominic, to help us give faithful expression to Dominic’s timeless vision, to be open to the power of the Spirit and to be a light for our times, for the Church and our troubled world.

Remember the early Dominican blessing:

May God the Father bless us,

May God the Son heal us

May God the Holy Spirit enlighten us and give us eyes to see with,

Ears to hear with

And hands to do the work of God with,

Feet to walk with,

And a mouth to preach the word of salvation with,

And the angel of peace to watch over us and lead us at last, by our God’s gift, to the kingdom.

AMEN.