

We Are All Boat People Here
5th Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A
Waitangi Day
6 February 2011

About a thousand years ago flotillas of long-range ocean going craft made their way through the Bismarck Archipelago to the north of Papua New Guinea, and then fanned out across the South Pacific. Proceeding in hops and jumps over the next few hundred years these maritime explorers settled in a number of the major island groups, including our own. The people now called Maori arrived in these islands about the time the wars of the roses were occurring in England.

So on this Waitangi day the first reality we need to get our heads around is that these islands were empty of human occupation for much of recorded history. Most of the world's indigenous peoples have been in situ for along time; the Aboriginals for instance have been in Australia for thousands of years, whereas Maori have only been here since the High Middle Ages, really just the blink of an eye in historical time.

Maori settled mostly in the North Island. The assumption that they lived in close harmony with nature is not entirely true. There is evidence of large-scale man made burn offs in this period to assist human occupation and food production.

Just over three hundred years later the next wave of maritime explorers began to arrive. The whalers and the missionaries detested each other, but something important had happened – the gospel had arrived here. Maybe the bearers of the good news weren't ideal people – I find it hard to like Samuel Marsden – and maybe the version of Christianity they brought wasn't to everybody's taste – but the vital thing was that the best of gifts had been brought to these shores. Its influence would be profound on the emerging culture of New Zealand, and lets remember that the missionaries tried hard to protect Maori from the worst aspects of European culture. Indeed that was part of the motivation for the signing of the Treaty we remember today.

For the next few decades as the first wave of European settlers arrived an uneasy but mutually beneficial pattern of settlement emerged with the new arrivals hugging the coasts in large communities, and Maori providing much of their food from large scale farming in the interior. They were keen to have the new arrivals around so as to appropriate their literacy, their technology and unfortunately their muskets. It is a pity that this pattern couldn't have continued throughout the 19th century, but the land hunger of successive waves of settlers put paid to that, which brings us to our current dilemma of broken Treaty promises, and a determination to honour the Treaty and to put things

right. It is worth talking about this in church because of course the Anglican Church has been at the forefront of those who have wanted to see this happen.

How a society goes about redressing a deep-seated historical wrong is not without interest to Christians in terms of the dynamics of penitence and forgiveness. At the heart of the treaty settlement process is the notion of generous reparation payments that give Maori the wherewithal to make a new start in reaching out for the good things of New Zealand society. This is a relatively novel approach – only Canada so far as I am aware has a more radical strategy of giving First Nation people's just about total autonomy on their traditional tribal lands.

Where things will get interesting is that the treaty settlement reparation process is time limited. It will come to an end within the lifetime of many of us – the national government is particularly keen to make sure that this is the case. When that happens will it have produced a feeling on the part of Maori that justice has been done, and that we can get on with a new chapter in our history? The initial signs are not promising.

The Anglican Church is the canary in the mineshaft here. The effect of the changes to our constitution was to give Maori political parity at General Synod level, a parallel and autonomous structure of national church life, and an increased share of financial resources from trust funds. But even defenders of the constitutional changes admit that the hoped for result of an end to an aggrieved sense of burning injustice on the part of many Maori Anglicans has not happened, whereas there has been a growing sense of entitlement. Tikanga Maori have not seriously tackled the challenge of finding the money to pay its parish priests across the country in its parallel jurisdiction, but just keeps putting its hand out at General Synod for more. So as a society, and as a church, we may have to face the dilemma of what to do when the aggrieved party doesn't want to forgive.

The foreshore and seabed issue has become the lightning rod conductor in this vortex of intense feelings. I am no friend of Maori nationalism, but I think Helen Clark made a major mistake here. She should have let customary rights claims make their way through the courts. Maori would have felt that justice had been done, and it is unlikely that the courts would have made many changes to what obtains now. The failure to stand up to red neck panic mongering resulted in the formation of the Maori party, and the beginning of the end for the labour government.

Just recently there has been another wave of new arrivals. Walking around Melbourne and Auckland last year I kept thinking to myself, "The future is Asian." By that I don't mean I subscribe to the yellow

peril racist fantasies of 19th century New Zealand. Rather, what I have in mind is the highly visible and much appreciated contribution that high achieving Asians are making in the fields of scholarship and business. And of course the most obvious of the gifts they have brought with them is the change in our eating habits. If you dine out today you might have trouble finding a Sunday roast, but there will be plenty of curries on offer.

Another contribution they are making is to the revitalization of our churches. On my last Sunday in Auckland last year I went to St Patrick's Catholic Cathedral to the packed standing room only main Mass of the day. The overwhelming majority of the congregation were Koreans and Phillipinos, and their intense devotional fervour was obvious. If this translates through in to vocations then the priest drought may be coming to an end. I gather that Fr Miles O'Malley's replacement in Dallington is an Indian priest.

But this social change brings its own tensions. I suspect that in large measure it is what lies behind Maori insistence that they be given reserved seats in the new Auckland super city local governance arrangements, a campaign backed by Bishop John Paterson. Maori are feeling swamped by the new arrivals, and want a mechanism to hold their own.

I have called this sermon, "We are all boat people here." I got the phrase from an historian I have a lot of time for, Professor John Stenhouse of Otago University. He used it in summing up and thanking a visiting Maori speaker, who then became rather grumpy at what he saw as a slur on the indigenous people. But for me, "We are all boat people here," cuts to the heart of the matter on Waitangi day because it gives us a perspective from which we can all get over ourselves, and come to a new appreciation of what we have to offer each other.

For the truth is that we are all recent arrivals in these empty beautiful islands at the bottom of the world. Humankind has hardly been here for very long at all in this one of the most recently discovered parts of the world. And that sense of freshness and newness has given us the opportunity to try some new solutions to the injustices of the past.

Christianity is a young religion by the standards of most of the other great world religions, and it is also a recent arrival in this country. Far from sputtering out as an outworn relic of the colonial past its story here has only just begun. From the Maori who received it, the Pakeha who gave it, and the Asians who are retransmitting it, there have each come fresh perspectives on the faith that is the hope of the world. And it is a faith that invites us to transcend our ethnic silos, tribal mythologies and cultural special pleadings. For in the Church we are a special people who belong to God with our own unique

culture. Its central symbol the cross reminds us that Christ breaks down the walls that divides, and makes us a fresh start people.