

200 Years of Christianity in New Zealand

By Rex Morgan

Many Christians in New Zealand are celebrating the 200th year since the first public Christian service was held in New Zealand in 1814. This anniversary is important, not only to the history of their faith, but to the development of New Zealand as a whole.

Christianity had a very significant role in the founding of our nation, including the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. Christians were the backbone of the first permanent settlement by Europeans in New Zealand, having been invited by Maori to live near them. Indeed, Christianity has contributed immensely to the growth and success of our nation.

Many Kiwis have a rather sketchy knowledge of their country's history. History is notorious for being a dull and boring study. But it doesn't have to be that way. A look at the records of early European settlement in Aotearoa can be quite enthralling.

Have you ever wondered what the Maori thought when they first spotted huge ships with billowing sails off the coast? How did they respond when the white-skinned people wearing strange clothing wanted to come ashore? How long was it before the visitors began building European houses? How did the first horses and cattle come to New Zealand? Whose idea was the Treaty of Waitangi? The answers to questions like these can be fascinating.

The First European Visitors

Most Kiwis know that the first recorded European sighting of 'the land of the long white cloud' was by the Dutch navigator Abel Tasman in

1642. On seeing the two ships in Golden Bay, the Maori launched several canoes to take a closer look at the strangers. Unfortunately there was some disagreement and a skirmish in which four Europeans and a Maori lost their lives.

After that Tasman avoided contact with Maori, whom he considered as 'enemies'. He never set foot on shore, but it was the Dutch who called the country 'Nieuw Zeeland'.

It was over 100 years before the next European visitor, James Cook, came in 1769. He spent six months sailing around New Zealand, and made contact with Maori on a few occasions, even trading some food with them. Amazingly, the French explorer Jean de Surville arrived at almost exactly the same time, and his ship crisscrossed the path of Cook's without either of them actually realising the other was there!

Three years later another French navigator, Marion du Fresne, turned up and gave names to a few places, including 'Mascarin Peak', not knowing Cook had already named



A Celtic cross at Rangihoua Bay commemorates the arrival of missionary Samuel Marsden and his Christian message in 1814.

it Mount Egmont! Du Fresne's crew set up camp for a while and got on quite well with Maori, but when they moved an abandoned canoe to their camp, the Maori objected and killed du Fresne and some of his men.

By this time there were convict settlements in Australia and on Norfolk Island, and in 1793 a ship was sent to pick up a couple of Maori, named Tuki and Huru, and take them to teach the Norfolk Islanders how to use flax to make ropes and clothes. Philip King, the Governor of Norfolk Island, developed a special attachment to the two men. He gave them axes and tools, and when they



In December 1814, Anglican missionary Samuel Marsden arrived at the Bay of Islands after journeying from his base in New South Wales. He came ashore at Rangihoua Bay on Christmas Day and preached the first Christian sermon ever delivered in New Zealand, to Maori and Europeans. This is artist Russell Clark's depiction of the event, painted in 1964.

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returned home they requested the ship's guns to be fired, which caused the other Maori much amazement!

Before long, whaling and sealing ships began visiting New Zealand and made further contact with Maori, taking some of them to live in Australia.

Enter Samuel Marsden

In 1794, on the recommendation of the anti-slavery reformer William Wilberforce, Samuel Marsden was sent to Australia as chaplain to the

convict settlement in New South Wales. He visited Governor King on Norfolk Island and found out how well the Maori were regarded. So he invited some of the Maori living in Australia to stay at his home in Parramatta. He got on particularly well with Te Pahi, an important chief from the Bay of Islands, and his nephew Ruatara. Marsden learnt Maori from Ruatara, and taught him English and skills such as gardening, and they began discussing spiritual matters.

Meanwhile, back in New Zealand some of the whaling and sealing captains were mistreating some Maori, promising to sail them to Australia, and then flogging them and using them as slaves. In retaliation Maori attacked a ship, the *Boyd*, and set it on fire, killing and eating the captain and crew.

An interesting account records that Ruatara, wishing to introduce wheat production into New Zealand, brought back a quantity of seed wheat to share with a number of chiefs. It grew well, but the Maori, never having seen it before, thought they would find the grain in the roots, as with potatoes. When no grain was found they pulled all the plants out and burnt them. Ruatara left his wheat to mature and the locals were amazed to see that the wheat grew at the top of the plants!¹

Shipping between Australia and New Zealand was very irregular, so Samuel Marsden bought his own brig, the *Active*, and sent it across the Tasman in June 1814 with two missionaries, Thomas Kendall, a schoolteacher, and William Hall, a carpenter. Marsden believed in teaching physical skills, as well as spiritual instruction.

Kendall and Hall arrived at Ruatara's home at Rangihoua in the Bay of Islands, and began to teach the locals gardening and building techniques. Kendall started lessons for the children. After a few weeks they took Ruatara back to Australia, along with three other chiefs. As an insight into the way learning was achieved, records show that the Maori were given a fishhook for every page of an English grammar book they learnt on the voyage!

Marsden himself joined the next trip to New Zealand, which had 35 people on board, including Ruatara and nine other Maori, as well as cattle, sheep, pigs, poultry, horses, goats, cats, and dogs. 'It bore a perfect resemblance to Noah's Ark!' commented a sailor in the ship's journal, adding that 'It wasn't very comfortable'.

The Story of Tarore

In 1835 a missionary gave a twelve year old Maori girl called Tarore a small book entitled 'Te Rongopai a Ruka', the gospel of Luke in Maori. Tarore's father, Ngakuku, was the chief of the Waikato tribe. He saw that Tarore treasured the book very highly, so he asked her to read it to him.

One night when Tarore's family needed to travel across the Kaimai ranges to Tauranga, they stopped to spend the night at the Wairere Falls. Their campfire attracted a raiding party from a rival Rotorua tribe, led by Uita. Tarore was killed while sleeping with the book under her pillow. Uita took the book, but he was unable to read, so it lay discarded for some time. One day a slave, Ripahau, who was able to read, came on a visit. He read Tarore's book aloud to Uita, who was convicted by its words. He took to heart the message to love one's enemies, and decided to become a Christian. He

even sent a message to Ngakuku to apologise for killing Tarore.

Although his friends expressed a desire for utu (revenge), Ngakuku had also been touched by the message of Luke, and he forgave Uita. And so the two tribes were reconciled. Peace had come, not through war, but through listening to and practicing the words of a book, interesting evidence that truly the pen can be mightier than the sword.

But that wasn't the end of the story. The slave, Ripahau, later went south to Otaki and taught Tamihana, the son of the great chief Te Rauparaha to read. He sent back to Rotorua for more books and amazingly Tarore's very book was returned to him, still with Ngakuku's name in it! Tamihana became a Christian, as did Ripahau, and even Te Rauparaha was strongly influenced by Christianity. Tarore's book was then taken down to the South Island, and used to spread the gospel there. When Bishop Selwyn visited the South Island six years later, although no European



Tarore's Grave

minister had yet travelled there, many Maori had learned to read and write and had become Christians. The only book they had known was Tarore's 'Te Rongopai a Ruka'. What an amazing and productive journey had been taken by this little book!

The gospel of Luke is widely available today.

Have you read it?

On 22 December 1814 they landed at Ruatara's pa of Rangihoua, where the Maori were amazed to see the strange animals from abroad. One cow took off into their midst, causing alarm and terror! Marsden climbed up and rode one of the horses along the beach, and the locals stared at him in wide-eyed amazement. Ruatara had tried to tell them about horses in the past, but since there was no Maori word for horse, he had to use the word kuri (dog). When he had spoken of large kuri carrying people in 'land canoes' (carriages), they hadn't believed him.

The First Service

On Christmas Day 1814 Ruatara fenced off some land on the beach front at Oihi Bay, down the hill from Rangihoua pa. He erected a pulpit and reading desk made from an old canoe and a couple of planks, and covered them with cloth he had brought from Australia. He arranged old canoes as seats for the missionaries and other Europeans.

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It is interesting to note that the missionaries came to New Zealand at the request of Maori, and the hosts arranged for this first service. Quite a few chiefs had come from surrounding districts to be in the audience. Professors of Maori education Alison Jones and Kuni Kaa recently wrote: 'This year it is time to remember and celebrate that Pakeha came to New Zealand under Maori protection and at Maori invitation, and to reflect on what that invitation might mean 200 years later'.²

Marsden was delighted with the preparations and this opportunity to 'publish the glad tidings of the gospel for the first time on this island'. He announced the first hymn, 'All People That on Earth Do Dwell', and later commented: 'I felt my very soul melting within me as I viewed the congregation'.³

One of the chiefs, Korokoro, gave signals for the Maori audience to

stand up and sit down at the right time, and if anyone started talking, he tapped them on the head with his cane.

Marsden chose a passage from the book of Luke for his sermon text, announcing the birth of Jesus as 'good tidings of great joy for all people'.⁴ At last the gospel had come to another far-flung nation.

It was a lot for the Maori to take in, and some of them whispered to Ruatara that they couldn't follow what was being spoken. After Marsden finished the service, Ruatara explained the importance of what had been said. As they left the enclosure, more than 300 Maori surrounded the Europeans and performed a rousing haka. Oral tradition records the words as a joyous chant expressing pleasure at the arrival of the visitors with their message of peace and joy.

Marsden went back to the ship and wrote in his journal: 'In this manner

the gospel has been introduced into New Zealand. I fervently pray that the glory of it may never depart from its inhabitants until time shall be no more'.⁵

Marsden stayed for three months, departing at the end of February 1815. He left a group of hardy and courageous missionaries teaching the Maori skills such as gardening, farming, rope making, and building. In 1816 Thomas Kendall opened the first school with a roll of 33 children. The mission also taught Maori the values of peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation, in an era where there was much fighting amongst the tribes, with cannibalism, sorcery, and the principle of 'utu' (vengeance) holding sway. Maori had

long practiced aroha (love) towards their own iwi (tribe), but biblical principles such as the instruction to 'love your enemies'⁶ were radical new concepts.

Interestingly, the great naturalist Charles Darwin visited New Zealand on the Beagle in 1835. He was astonished to see an English farmhouse with well-dressed fields at Waimate. He remarked: 'Native workmanship, taught by the missionaries, has effected this; the lesson of the missionary is the enchanter's wand. The house has been built, the windows framed, the fields ploughed, and even the trees grafted, by the Maori. At the mill a Maori was seen powdered white with flour, like his brother miller in England'.⁷

The Gospel Spreads

The Christian message began to spread throughout New Zealand. This was due not so much to the missionaries, who remained in the north for some years, as to the Maori, who journeyed to the Bay of Islands to hear it, or were taken there as slaves and then took it back to their areas. 'These dark skinned teachers carried Christianity into a hundred nooks and corners', stated William Pember Reeves in *The Long White Cloud*.

Rotongia, a chief from the Waikato, for instance, who had walked 250 miles to Paihia, stated: 'One thing only do I desire; it is not a blanket, it is not anything that will pass away, but this is my great desire—the word of God'.⁸ He was referring to the printing of the first New Testament in Maori in 1837, for which there was a huge demand for copies.

Noted historian Michael King observed: 'From the 1830s the momentum had been increased by the activity of Maori evangelists, many of them former slaves who had been converted in Ngapuhi territory and then allowed to return home when their masters also embraced the new faith and rejected slavery as an institution'.⁹ By the mid-1840s it is estimated that half of the Maori population was gathering regularly for Christian worship.¹⁰

As more and more Europeans came to settle in New Zealand, disputes began to arise. New Zealand did not have any rule of law; justice had to be sought in New South Wales. So the Maori asked for some form of law appropriate for New Zealand. The answer was to send William Hobson to establish a British colony, and to design a treaty as a legal base for the fledgling nation.

The Treaty of Waitangi was quickly put together by Hobson and British Resident James Busby, and translated into Maori by the missionary Henry Williams.



There are two buildings side by side at Waitangi: the Treaty House (the residence of James Busby), where the Treaty was signed in 1840, and the Whare Runanga (Maori meeting house) built by Maori to commemorate the centennial in 1940.



The two types of architecture (one divided into rooms for privacy and functionality; the other with a large hall where everybody sleeps and shares discussions, with ornate carvings recording ancestral stories) represent two different types of people, cultures and ways of life.



It is inevitable that clashes will sometimes occur when two so diverse cultures come together. However, there is a key to achieving the unity of separate peoples. As you step back from the two buildings, you see a large flag pole on the Treaty Grounds, in the shape of a cross. This is of course the symbol of Jesus Christ, worshipped by Christians as having died on a cross to become the mediator of reconciliation between all people. At the foot of the cross of Jesus all people become one.

'If Williams had not actively courted the chiefs and explained to them the importance of the treaty—specifically that the Crown was honouring their request for protection—it would never have been signed', states historian Keith Newman.¹¹

The missionaries supported the document, believing it was the best chance of protecting Maori interests in the face of increasing British settlement.¹² They were the ones who led the effort to take the treaty throughout the nation, collecting signatures from the chiefs of the various tribes.

When preparing Maori leaders to sign the treaty, British Resident James Busby told them that the English too had been a nation of warring tribes until the story of Jesus had brought forgiveness, reconciliation, and restitution.¹³

Dr Laurie Guy's 2011 book, *Shaping Godzone*, states that 'the church has been midwife to the nation', and claims that

...without missionary influence there would have been no Treaty of Waitangi and no New Zealand as we know it today.

Governor Hobson expressed his gratitude for the efforts of Henry Williams, and later declared to the Legislative Council (in 1841) that if it wasn't for the help of the missionaries, a British colony would not have been established in New Zealand.¹⁴

Christianity's Contribution

It is easy to underestimate the valuable contribution of Christianity to our national story. Imagine if it hadn't been missionaries who started the first permanent settlement. Many of the sealers and whalers arriving in the early 1800s had been convicts in Australia and their behaviour was very disorderly. Their drunken conduct caused the principal settlement of Kororareka to be called 'the hell-hole of the Pacific'. They fought with Maori and took advantage of them.

The missionaries on the other hand were eager to live together with Maori

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and teach them literacy and other practical skills, as well as the ethical message of love and peace which is the foundation of the Christian gospel. Historian James Belich described the missionaries as 'agents of virtue in a world of vice'—a world the British Resident James Busby labelled 'extreme frontier chaos'.¹⁵

Historian Dr Paul Moon records: 'Christianity played a central role in the development of our state education system. By the 1820s, New Zealand's mission schools were the only source of primary schooling in the country'.¹⁶

A missionary, explorer, botanist, and politician, William Colenso brought the first printing press to New Zealand, and published the New Testament in Maori in 1837. 'This had a profound impact as the Maori language had no form of written script prior to the printing of the New Testament. By the middle of the 19th century, two thirds of Maori had rejected their old ways and turned to the Christian message'.¹⁷

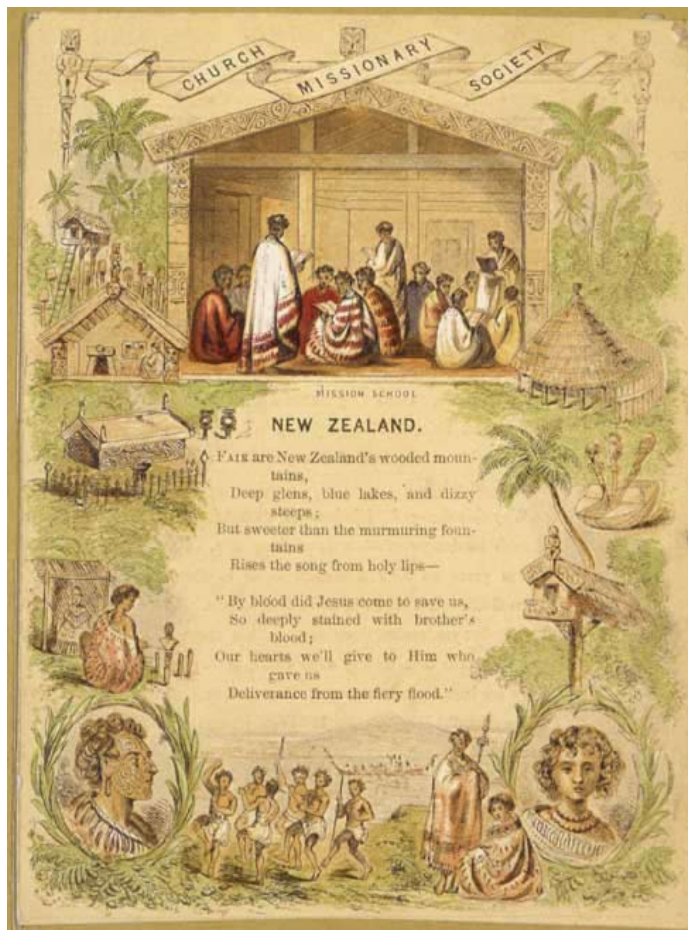
The strongest testimony to the benefits brought by Christianity comes

from Maori themselves. The great Ngapuhi chief Tamati Waka Nene said: 'When the Governor came here he brought with him the word of God by which we live; and it is through the teaching of that word that we are able to meet together this day under one roof'.¹⁸

Another Maori chief, Eruera Kahawai of Rotorua is quoted as saying in 1860:

It was the introduction of the gospel that put an end to all our evil ways. Yes, my friends, it was Christianity alone that did it. It put an end to thieving and many other sins. We have abandoned our old ways. The rule is now kindness to the orphan, charity, peace, and agricultural pursuits. I have now come under the wings of the Queen.¹⁹

Keith Newman writes: 'The tectonic shift away from blood utu and cannibalism, the rapid growth in literacy, the reduction of inter-tribal wars, new agricultural and trading skills and the freeing of slaves can primarily be attributed to the practical, spiritual, and humanitarian input of the missionaries and their faithful Maori teachers'.²⁰



The first Christian mission in New Zealand was founded in 1814 by a Sydney chaplain, Samuel Marsden. Though they had little success initially in converting Maori, the missionaries also wrote down the Maori language and started printing books in Maori. One of the leading missionary organisations was the Church Missionary Society. In a tract published in England after 1849 by the society to muster support, there were images of Maori and Maori life. On the page pictured here are verses of the society's 50th jubilee hymn.

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All of this is not to say that the missionaries were always just and right in their conduct. Far from it! They squabbled amongst themselves and often set a poor example of their faith. According to John Stenhouse, in an article entitled 'The History of the Christian Movement in New Zealand': 'Many Maori became disillusioned with Pakeha Christianity, especially after the wars of the 1860s. Tragically, they had reason so to do'.²¹ In the land wars a number of missionaries acted as chaplains to government troops, and this seemed like a stab in the back to many Christian Maori. Large numbers of Maori left the established

churches as they failed to come to support of Maori when their land was unjustly confiscated, such as at Parihaka in the 1870s. But Stenhouse notes: 'If Maori-Pakeha relations have been relatively good in comparison with race relations elsewhere in the world, then evangelical Christianity had a great deal to do with it. Professor Sir Keith Sinclair, who could never be accused of having a religious axe to grind, has argued exactly this. The fact that Maori rights and welfare were re-

spected and protected as much as they were in New Zealand, enshrined in the Treaty of Waitangi and in subsequent legislation, shows how important Christian attitudes were in setting positive standards for Pakeha attitudes and behaviour from the beginning of settlement'.²² New Zealand certainly has a rich and fascinating history. The bicentenary of Christianity is an opportune occasion to review the development of our nationhood, and to recognise the positive contribution Christianity has made to our heritage.

Notes

- ¹ Samuel Marsden, HO 176A, p. 26; Patricia Bawden, *The Years Before Waitangi*, 2006 reprint, p. 49
- ² Alison Jones and Kuni Kaa, 'The day Maori first said, Haere mai, Pakeha', *NZ Herald*, 6 February 2014
- ³ Robert McNab, *Historical Records of New Zealand*, 1908-1914, Vol. 1, p. 363
- ⁴ Luke 2:10-11
- ⁵ Robert McNab, *Historical Records of New Zealand*, 1908-1914, Vol 1, p. 363
- ⁶ Matthew 5:44
- ⁷ Charles Darwin, *Journal of Researches*, London, 1890, pp. 509-510
- ⁸ British and Foreign Bible Society, 37th Report
- ⁹ Michael King, *History of New Zealand*, 2003, p. 143
- ¹⁰ NZ Christian Network, 'Discussion Paper for the Gospel Bicentenary'
- ¹¹ Keith Newman, *Bible and Treaty*, 2010, p. 148
- ¹² NZ Christian Network, 'Discussion Paper for the Gospel Bicentenary'
- ¹³ Jeff Fountain, 'Midwife to a Nation', www.schumancentre.eu/category/weeklyword
- ¹⁴ Keith Newman, *Bible and Treaty*, 2010, p. 159
- ¹⁵ New Zealand History Online, section 'The Christian Missionaries'
- ¹⁶ Paul Moon, 'Bible in School battlers denying our heritage', *NZ Herald*, 13 February 2014
- ¹⁷ www.cai.org/bible-studies/christian-history-new-zealand
- ¹⁸ Keith Newman, *Bible and Treaty*, 2010, p. 290
- ¹⁹ *Te Karere The Maori Messenger* newspaper, July 1860
- ²⁰ Keith Newman, *Bible and Treaty*, 2010, p. 312
- ²¹ *New Vision, New Zealand*, 1993, New Zealand Christian Network, p. 34
- ²² Keith Sinclair, 'Why are Race Relations in New Zealand Better Than in South Africa, South Australia or South Dakota?' *New Zealand Journal of History*, 5:2 1971, pp. 121-127



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