

WAITANGI DAY REFLECTIONS

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai, 07 February 2017

Luke 2:9-14

[MW16-04]

What does Waitangi day mean to you?

- a day off, a sleep in, a holiday ... ???

What does Waitangi Day mean to you?

- a time to give thanks for our nation and its people?
an opportunity to remember some of our history?
a time when people with grievances stir things up?
- just another day?

What does "Waitangi Day" mean to you?

[space]

I suggest that at the very least Waitangi Day gives us an opportunity

- to take some time out of the "ordinary" to both relax and reflect
and in doing so follow the lead of God's people, the Hebrew nation

You see the people of God have always celebrated!

- in fact celebrating is integral to being the people of God
in the Old Testament you can read about all the special festivals
and celebrations and occasions they had
- can anyone name any of them ... ???

Here are some:

- Passover, First Fruits, Harvest (Shavuot), Trumpets (Ros Hashana)
Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), Tabernacles/Shelters (Sukkoth)

All of these celebrations, festivals, occasions

- were a chance to gather as the people of God
and remember how God had been active in their life
and remind them of the many blessings God had given them
- it also kept them together
reminded them of who they were
where they were going and the way they were to live

What has all this to do with "Waitangi Day"?

- Waitangi Day is a "national festival", a "national celebration"
Jewish Festivals in the Old Testament were national celebrations
something the whole people did together
- if not always at the same place, it was at the same time

So I wonder: what do we do together, as a nation, in our country?

- in Aotearoa New Zealand?
what do we do to celebrate that we are a nation?
that we have so much to be thankful for ...
- that we have a God who is bound up in all this ...

The National Anthem we will sing in English and Maori has a first line which says:
God of nations at Thy feet, in the bonds of love we meet

Yesterday was February the sixth, Waitangi Day

- it is a day that should be of great significance to all in this country but I kind of get the sense that for many people it just doesn't matter or else it is such a 'thorny' issue they just don't want to think about it
- now I don't know what you feel or think about this day my personal experience is that something about it has been lost
- when I was at primary school, 6 or 7, Waitangi Day was not a holiday but I remember watching the ceremony at Waitangi on TV
- I got the idea it was a big deal, something important there were speeches, songs, prayers and it said something about who we were as a nation
- even at 6 or 7 the sense of pride came through and made an impression

Now, nearly 50 years on, it seems quite different

- I have to stress this is just my impression however it almost seems as if Waitangi Day has been hi-jacked by the media and those of a more radical persuasion
- as if pakeha New Zealanders are not quite sure what to do about this day just keep your head down and do or say nothing a sense of not wanting to do something inappropriate may be even, let's just get past this day ...
- and the thing is it is not just a secular thing the church and God have been involved since the beginning but more on that later

These thoughts first came to me really strongly a few years ago

- when I was on study leave in the United States we had the good fortune to be there on July 4, "Independence Day" the day when America celebrates becoming a nation of their own
- it is a national holiday and all over the place people unashamedly celebrate! they have magnificent fireworks displays in the evening
- during the day people get together in parks, like the one we went to families and friends gather, they take their couches, huge bbqs, tents they play games of volleyball and baseball, throw frisbees, fly kites
- where we went was like a giant-sized version of the domain market with a festival thrown in and stalls offering food, drink, ice creams face-painting, balloons etc

There was something special about being out there with everyone else

- on a day when Americans all over the country were doing a similar thing I found myself wondering: I know the country has its problems but what's wrong with a little national pride and celebration?
- in the USA they let off fireworks on July 4 in spectacular public displays to celebrate independence: the birth and continuation of a nation
- here in Aotearoa New Zealand we have fireworks on November 5 to celebrate what ... not blowing up Parliament Buildings? something that happened, or didn't happen, in a country that is not even our own!

I find myself thinking

- wouldn't it be more appropriate to have a spectacular public display of fireworks on February 6
- to celebrate the birth of our nation ...

Back in then, reflecting on our July the 4th experience, I wrote this:

Sure there are problems, things that are not quite right in New Zealand. That seems even more reason to have a day when we might remember the things we have to be proud of, celebrate our achievements, be inspired for the future; and that we could do it together. In a nation of 'only' three and a half million people, with a knack for being able to fix anything, it seems to me that should not be too difficult to arrange!

I said before the church and God were involved from the beginning

- on Christmas Day 1814 Samuel Marsden preached the first recorded sermon in this country
- the people who gathered to hear it would have heard the same words we heard in our Gospel reading this morning:
The angel said: *"I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people"*
- why is this important? Because it is good news for all people ... **all** people and we Anglicans were right in there sharing this good news

Anglicans were right in there in preaching this good news

- and Anglicans were right in there in the arrangements leading to the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi
- there is no escaping that God was in there, in the shaping of our nation from the beginning

Now, the history of our nation since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, is not smooth

- there is no escaping that either
and these days there are lots of demands, lots of grievances to deal with even in our Anglican church
- these do have to be worked through and not glossed over or ignored however alongside that I would like to suggest this:

We have so much to be thankful for in Aotearoa New Zealand

- we were once described as 'God's Own Country'
perhaps a bit pretentious, a bit pompous and proud
yet we are definitely blessed
- it seems to me that rather than dredging up mistakes
focusing only on things that need attention
- it would help more to focus on the good things
to have a positive attitude, be thankful, recognise our blessings
- then the negatives would not seem so bad
and things would start to fall into place

We in our country, Aotearoa New Zealand, have much to be rightly proud of

- we can celebrate that we are the people of God
that we have this good and pleasant land
that we have so much to be thankful for
- and we can do it on Waitangi Day!

That is what those Jewish Festivals were all about

- today our place in our nation, as a church is to look for the good and celebrate it and to remind people, all the people, that we are God's people

The angel told the shepherds: *Don't be afraid, I have good news for you*

- Samuel Marsden told the people of this land on Christmas Day 1814: *Good news I bring to you this day*
- in that continuing tradition, the church, our church is to bring good news to this land and its people

Perhaps the offering of our church, the Anglican Church, for Waitangi Day

- could be this:
- two peoples, one nation
- two peoples, one Saviour
- two peoples, one book that tells our story
a story of good news

This is the conclusion to what I wrote in the States during my study leave:

I really appreciated what my country had given me when we were with an American musician selling his hand-crafted flutes on the beach front at Santa Cruz. He played the U.S. national song on his flute and said: "It's a bit corny but you know ... it's our song." He asked what ours was. So there we were, all five of us Thorntons, on the beachfront late Sunday afternoon, singing 'God Defend New Zealand' in English and Maori. Only the musician and the little group that had gathered to try out the flutes heard; but I felt very proud to be a 'Kiwi', very proud of our nation as we stood there singing. Some may say that the fourth of July, national celebrations and being proud of your country have little to do with Christian faith or spirituality. However it is about an attitude to life. An attitude to life I believe Jesus exemplified and called us to follow.

Jesus celebrated life - wherever he was, whoever he was with. We are encouraged to do the same. To be proud of who we are, where we have come from - and where we are going to. To look for the good things we have around us, to honour the gifts of the past and be thankful for them. Sometimes that might involve fireworks; sometimes it might mean a quiet "thank you Lord". And it's about always remembering whose people we are.

I will conclude with the translation of the Maori words of the first verse of our National Anthem:

*O Lord, God,
Of all people
Listen to us,
Cherish us
May good flourish,
May your blessings flow
Defend Aotearoa.*

Amen.