

Sermon Archive 302

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Knox Church, Christchurch

A series of readings and reflections

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Preamble

While living in China, I met a man from Poland. I put to him something that I had heard: that within the Polish language, there was no word for "weird". He told me that while that might be technically true, it was practically false, since there were weird people and things in Poland, that Polish people knew were weird, and could find a way of describing them as such. It wasn't about one English word corresponding to one Polish word, word for word, simple pasted onto simple. It was about finding ways of sharing experience, making connections - as we lived in different languages and worlds.

Well; the naive word on the street is that Matariki is "Maori New Year" - a simple delayed 1st of January. But no; it's not quite that simple.

Matariki *is* a time of the year. But also, it's a constellation of stars, and our being human beneath their sparkle. It's a planting of crops for our future eating and being well. It's a remembering of those who have gone before us. It's a kind of turning of the heart from the past (with all its regret and gratitude), towards the future, with its aspiration and need.

We simplify it all into "Maori New Year".

Sorting out some of the themes and nuances, here's a series of readings, reflections and shortened hymns for our spiritual engagement at Matariki.

The First Lesson: Genesis 1: 1-10

A Reflection: Earth, sky and weeping stars

Yes, the common experience is that there is earth below and sky above. That we stand here, and look there, seems quite evident from who and how we are: - Maori, Pakeha - we stand on earth and look at sky. The common experience . . .

One story has a God forcing primordial glug apart from the chaos - such that land and sky exist. It wasn't until the fourth day, after there were plants, that there were stars in the "second day" sky. But by the fourth day, there we have

the stars in the sky, being signs of God being creative and good.

Another story also has the earth being separated from the sky. This one has Ranginui, the sky father, being ripped apart from Papatuanuku, the earth mother. The separation of earth and sky (by which we stand here, and look there) was given as lovers were forced apart. There's a brokenness to how we stand on the earth. Something needs fixing - maybe like that ejection from the Garden of Eden needs fixing. Both stories are gesturing towards a common experience of distance, removal - a longing for a bridge of reunion.

Anyway; in the Matariki story, one of the separated partners expresses his grief by tearing out his eyes, and casting them out across the sky that is his home. The stars that rise, and are seen by us on earth, at this time of year, are the torn-out eyes of the sky father, in grief of his having been torn from his earth partner.

Creation is partly about being torn - being broken and separated - as it is in the Christian story - as the human beings lose their place in the garden. For some, the stars are reminders that order was given. For some, stars are signs of sorrow that community was lost. Matariki.

Hymn: God who made the earth

The Second Lesson: Deuteronomy 8: 10-18

A Reflection: Saying grace

Though the land is good, and fertile, and full of nourishment, it still needs coaxing, if food is to end up on the table. If it is to eat, the human being needs to find ways of cultivating, harvesting the earth and the forest. This can be done recklessly, leaving the earth tired. It can be done without respect or gratitude, leaving the earth unacknowledged - a victim of clumsiness or greed.

Or, it can be done with a responsible gratitude . . . When the people needed to make a waka, for sailing across the water, no totara tree was ever removed from the bush without an acknowledgement of its greatness, and the offering of a prayer to Tane, the god of the forest. Harvest with gratitude! That the god, Rongo, had a place within the panoply of gods, as god of cultivated food, showed that cultivation was something sacred. Little statues of Rongo, were placed around growing fields, especially in kumara fields - a reminder that the kumara never existed on earth until Rongo had stolen it from heaven, and brought it down here as a gift and a prize. How did Rongo get to heaven, I wonder . . .

The special time, for Maori, for remembering the goodness of the earth, the

fertility of the land, the importance of living and harvesting gently, was when the earth was sleeping, resting, holding its breath - Matariki.

Another people, Israelites on a journey, just about to enter a land, are told to remember the times that they once were hungry, and were fed solely by the miracle of manna, God-given food. They're encouraged to acknowledge that they eat not simply by their own industry and initiative, but by the natural and divine goodness that surrounds them. "Don't forget the Lord, your God" they hear. Today is a day quietly to celebrate that food is on your table - saying grace. Today is a day gently to rejoice that the green shoot will come again from the cooled ground of winter. Living with gratitude - and a commitment to carefulness. Matariki.

Hymn: For the fruits of all creation

The Third Lesson: 2 Timothy 1: 1-5

A Reflection: Those who went before us

Writing to his young fella in the faith (Timothy), Paul acknowledges the significance in Timothy's life of the women who raised him: Timothy's grandmother, Lois, and Eunice, his mother. Timothy is who he is, in faith, but also in all other things, because these upper-generational older ones have cradled him and laid the path. And at Matariki, those here and now, standing on earth, and looking at the stars, consider those by whose love and work they have come to stand and be.

A few weeks ago, I found myself having lunch with my mother, her siblings and their in-laws. One brought peanut brownies and homemade gin. One brought conversation and deafness. One brought love. And some cousins turned up with familiarity and friendship - and with unspoken reassurance that I wasn't the only one going grey. (. . . *Further description of my family's failings* . . .) Many of them, grieving my heart deeply, vote in ways that my great, great grandfather would like. They're a terrible bunch.

But they are the cradle, the arms, the family, within which God made me who I am. Foundational. Real. The people on the ground, under the stars, among whom I became. Not at the gathering this time, was my father - a singularly significant influence on who I have become.

Part of Matariki, for us here on the good earth, while we look up at the stars that are about grief and hope and wonder, is giving thanks for those who stood here with us - as we "became". Particular attention, at Matariki, is given to those who have died in the last year - a time of remembrance of the important ones. We're grateful not just for the earth and the food, but also for

the people.

That's all OK. Paul remembers the women who formed his protégé, Timothy - and we all remember, in the winter, beneath the stars of grief and belonging, those who have made a place for us here, in this world. All is well.

Matariki.

Hymn: Say yes to life with all its hopes

The Fourth Lesson: Hebrews 4: 14-16

A Reflection: Tangled in the kite string

I'm told that a well-established Matariki tradition is that of flying a kite. I'm also told that often depicted as flying a kite is the god, Rongo. I wonder if his kite may have played a part in how he stole the kumara from the heavens. That's a bit of research and story-listening I still have to do. But Rongo, causing kumara to grow in the cold earth-mother below, sends forth his kite to touch the sky-father above. Is he wanting to reunite Papatuanuku with Ranginui - flying his string from one to the other? Is he a symbol of wanting to mend the great tear in creation - a personification of bringing heaven to earth, and earth to heaven?

Another story is told of another god-person, praying in heaven for his brothers and sisters on earth - the Son of Man somehow tangled up with the Son of God - kind of tangled in a kite string of faith and imagination. Folklore or faith? What are trying to say? Something like someone in history having done something for the fixing of eternity? I'm not sure, but the author of Hebrews says it should give us mercy, grace, help and boldness. The earth is sleeping, and we are dreaming. Beneath the ripped-out eyes of Ranginui, gathering our food, remembering our dead, being grateful and committing ourselves to gentle living, it is Matariki.

Parallel stories, shared experiences - looking for words to describe our common experience and hope, it is Matariki.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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