

## Sermon Archive 457

Sunday 29 October, 2023

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections for Parkihaka Day

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



**The First Lesson:** Isaiah 50: 4-9a

**A Reflection:** Parihaka and the Suffering Servant

Here's the story of Parihaka.

In 1863, the New Zealand Settlement Act declared that Māori tribes who continued to assert independence were to be considered rebels and have their land confiscated. Tribes wishing to keep their land, nevertheless had to agree to the land being surveyed. In the course of the surveying project, millions of acres one way or another found their way into ownership by the crown. In 1879, convinced that they had never signed up to any of this, and indeed were protected from this by the Treaty of Waitangi, the people of the Taranaki settlement of Parihaka objected. Led by Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kakahi (two chiefs who had been entranced by the concept of non-violent passive resistance), they mounted a campaign whereby, at night, the survey pegs erected during the day were pulled out. The surveyors, doing their work during the day, went unmolested - but their work was systematically undone overnight. Also overnight, Parihaka people went ploughing - ploughing up land that had sprouted European farms on land never ceded. Survey pegs and furrows in the ground - No violence, but the point was made: "this is our land, and you can't have it".

Well, the Crown did indeed have the power under the Settlement Act to treat the survey peg resistance as "rebellious" and to respond to it in an appropriate and proportionate way.

On 29 June, the ploughmen began to be arrested, and replaced by others from around the area who'd been captivated by the non-violent ploughing concept. By August over 200 had been arrested. Early the following year 600 government soldiers came building roads and pulling down Māori infrastructure. The Parihaka response was to re-build the infrastructure. Again, it was a non-violent response. On the morning of 5 November 1881, 644 armed colonial soldiers and 956 volunteer militia stormed the Parihaka settlement.

*"The charge was halted by rows of children dancing and singing in front of the Parihaka entrance. After bypassing the singing children and rows of women, invaders found 2,500 unarmed adults sitting with Te Whiti and Tohu at the centre of the village. Some reports claim the Māori greeted the invaders with bread and song. Te Whiti and Tohu were arrested along with several others. Soldiers then dispersed the people and began destroying the settlement of Parihaka. There are reports of brutality and rape. Te Whiti's meeting house was wrecked. Houses and crops were destroyed and animals slaughtered. 4 5 acres of potatoes, taro, and tobacco were destroyed. Over the next several weeks, hundreds would be arrested, and up to 1,600 would be displaced from their homes in Taranaki; 600 would be allowed to remain. Further public assembly was banned."*

*The Māori leaders were imprisoned in the South Island. New legislation, the West Coast Peace Preservation Bill, decreed that Te Whiti and Tohu were not to be tried and were to be imprisoned indefinitely. If released, they could be arrested again at any time without charge. The two leaders were released in March 1883 and returned to Parihaka, which was in the process of rebuilding. Meanwhile, hundreds of Māori remained imprisoned, with their families often living in poverty, in exile, or in search of loved ones. The last of the Parihaka prisoners wouldn't return until summer 1898."*

[Māori resistance to British land seizure at Parihaka, New Zealand, 1879-81 - <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/maori-resistance-british-land-seizure-parihaka-new-zealand-1879-81> ]

That was the story of Parihaka. Was it accurately told? I tried to tell it as accurately as I could. And indeed, it's public record that eventually the Crown, through its government in 2019, acknowledged that it had, in this instance, been on the wrong side of history. As part of its Parihaka Reconciliation Bill, it published a detailed apology for what it had done. The full text of the apology is in the notices in the order of service. Te Whiti and Tohu had done nothing wrong, and that now is acknowledged.

But did Te Whiti and Tohu, in not doing wrong, achieve anything? Does non-violent passive resistance work? Other famous non-violent figures prompt the same question. Gandhi is assassinated. Martin Luther King assassinated. Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison. Non-violence brings no quick or simple victory.

Hidden in the depths of the scriptures that have inspired Jews and Christians (and what a complicated lot they are in terms of their legacies of peace), is Isaiah's image of the suffering servant. Some say he's something of a model for, or an inspiration for, Jesus - as he engages with the violence of the world.

The suffering servant gives his back to those who would strike it. He gives his cheeks to those who would pull out the hair of his beard. He gives his face to the insult and spitting. You would wonder, I suspect, especially if you loved the suffering servant (and felt for him, and wanted to protect him), what was being achieved. What do you achieve when you only have peace and resistance, while the other guys have guns?

Well, according to the suffering servant, you win the capacity never to feel ashamed of what you've done, or who you've become. You win the right to feel dignity, while others go down in history as debased. You win a different kind of victory - which often only comes long after you yourself have gone. Who's on the right side of history? History makes that clear, if you have time to wait.

In last week's sermon, we thought about the crisis that can come in the present moment - in the present moment for those who live in Caesar's world but belong to God. We thought about the practical necessity we have to pay various kinds of taxes in the current dispensation, and what sorts of things act as governors on that - like the greater sense of "right and justice" that Colin Kaepernick felt when he knelt his protest during the singing of his nation's National Anthem. At the time, many people from his national culture interpreted his actions as crazy, and him a loser. In that instance it didn't take history long to catch up and show who was on history's right side. Had history taken longer to catch up with a proper interpretation, would it have been any less the right thing to do? The suffering servant asks us this. There is a longer game. There is a bigger picture. There is Caesar and God. Is there perhaps a victory that is immediate (in terms of right and dignity), even if the rest of the world is committed to settling things through violence?

Who are you, God's suffering servant? Does your way work? Whom do we serve? Can we wait for others to understand us?

We remain seated to sing a Parihaka hymn.

### **The Second Lesson:** Ephesians 2: 13-22

#### **A Reflection:** Building the Third Culture

One of the grizzled old chestnuts for first generation Christian communities was what to do with old enmities. Their shared life was like a collage of ill-fitting stuff, over the top of which were scrawled ancient grievances, cultural prejudices, religious intolerance. And in their new counter-culture, the Christian community, they kept coming across people whom, in their earlier

life, they would have hated. Christian community (for them) included breaking bread with people they were used to describing as "the enemy". The letter written to the people of Ephesus (a very cosmopolitan city) acknowledges it. You were not at peace, the letter says. You were divided. You knew everything about suspicion of your neighbour. But now, in God, you have been given a unity with one another - and it is more powerful than any of the old things that once divided you. So you are no longer strangers and aliens, but fellow saints in this new thing called the "household of God". Let go of what divided you, and grasp (not just with joy, but with a disciplined commitment) to this new thing that unites you.

It's a nice idea - at least as nice as the idea about a suffering servant . . .

Peace and conflict theorists talk about the critical importance, in peace making, of building what they call "the third culture". It's an acknowledgment that in conflicted cross-cultural interactions, a good way forward is to identify common ground. You love your children, just as we love our children. You know fear, just as we know fear. John Kennedy talked about breathing the same air, we all are mortal, we all inhabit this small planet. It's kind of obvious that identifying common ground, building something new on what he hold together, is hugely important. We obviously need to build a third culture.

The difficult part, though, is working out what we need, from the old cultures, to leave behind. Will I be able to leave behind my version of the story that is told? Should I be required to let go of my land? What cost to the old, for the sake of building the new? Maybe the suffering servant only inspires us because he would not let certain things go - and thus brought suffering upon himself . . . We don't know, do we? And that's why it's complicated. Build it upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone - so that God can dwell in us.

Where from here? I think we know that the old way of violence for violence creates only violence, and is not the way. We remember Te Whiti, Tohu, the people of Parihaka - and others who have sought a different path. We meditate on the figure of the suffering servant, who loses the day, but knows he's vindicated. We consider the way that history, sometimes slowly uncovers the truth. We commit ourselves to being part of that third culture new reality. And we keep a moment of quiet.

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