

08 FEBRUARY 2026 WAITANGI SUNDAY

Rev Wayne Toleafoa

PUTTING OUT INTO THE DEEP

Isaiah 6: 1-13; I Corinthians 15: 1-11; Luke 5: 1-11

Waitangi will always hold a special place in my heart and mind. I've visited Waitangi nearly every year since 2006. Not always on Waitangi Day. The first time I visited was when I was a RNZN Chaplain and was asked to take part in an ecumenical church service at Waitangi, on Waitangi Day. Every year the Moderators of the PCANZ also take part in the special Church services.

The first thing that struck me about Waitangi was the beauty of the place. It happened to be a lovely summers day. The Waitangi Treaty Grounds had been freshly mown. Greener than green fields at the water's edge. The Pacific Ocean was a deep blue colour (with believe it or not), fish jumping out of the water, indicating that there were bigger fish chasing them up to the surface. And of course, in the centre of the field was the giant flagstaff which spoke of the history of that special block of land.

The modern flagstaff was the replacement for an original flagpole that was chopped down several times by Hone Heke in 1844-45, allegedly Heke was the first protestor, protesting about the taxation imposed on Maori in their own land. Protesting about the broken promises since the signing of the Treaty a short four years before. Protesting about the moving of the capital to Auckland, undermining the Maori Trading base in Northland.

The land on which the treaty was signed, was once the property of the first official British Resident James Busby. After Busby's death, Busby House and the Treaty Grounds passed into several private ownerships. Almost 100 years after the Treaty signing, in 1932, Waitangi was purchased by Lord & Lady Bledisloe who donated the Treaty Ground to the nation.

Over the years, the Treaty Grounds have seen the scene of all kinds of activity. Because Lt Governor William Hobson was a Royal Navy officer, the RNZN has played a special part in the military ceremonies held each year at Waitangi.

Whenever the Governor General attends, the RNZN will stage a Hundred-person Guard and parade the Royal NZ Ensign, as part of a Royal Salute to the King's representative.

It's a marvellous occasion. Thousands of people, including the inevitable politicians and a varying number of protesters are attracted to Waitangi every year. This political group attracts the most media attention.

Most of the people attending are there to enjoy the day – the friendly atmosphere, the magnificent February weather, the entertainment, the awesome sight of the fleet of

Maori waka, the Naval ceremonies and the food stalls. It is a 'Day Out', (or 'a few days out') to celebrate one of the most important days in our nation's history.

The Bay of Islands is also the starting place of Christian missions in Aotearoa NZ. The first Roman Catholic, Anglican and Methodist Missions began in and around Paihia and Waitangi. So, for Christians it is a place of new beginnings.

I don't have time in this short reflection to go through the history of the Treaty, **but what I do want to say is that after all the forensic and historical studies done on the Treaty, especially in the last 60 years, The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa of NZ, after much debate and study, have concluded that the Treaty of Waitangi was a sacred Covenant between Maori and Pakeha, and should be honoured and upheld.**

This is also the position of the Methodist Church of NZ, the Anglican Church and the Catholic Church in Aotearoa NZ.

Academic studies such as those done By Professor Dame Anne Salmond, Dr Claudia Orange, Dr Judith Binney, Jay Ruka, Keith Newman (to name a few) give us a clear rationale for supporting the Treaty. For the churches, the principles of love and justice apply. Christ being our model of what love and justice look like.

There are of course people who don't like the scholarly interpretation of history and see their own 'dislike' of it, as a reason to reject it. Even if the scholarly interpretations ring true, their rationale is, 'I dislike it, therefore I will reject it'. Especially if it doesn't serve my personal or financial interests.

They do not see the scholarship as an opportunity to face the truth that may set them (and others) free to look for a way forward.

Our Old Testament (Hebrew) scripture lesson tells us about the 'sacred' and 'the holy'. The Sacred and the holy presence of God called Isaiah to prophesy – to tell the truth, despite how unpopular that truth may sound to those who preferred an easier truth. God, through the vision of the seraphim, asks: "whom shall I send (to tell the truth)?" And "who will go for us?"

Isaiah takes up that responsibility - even though he feels sinful and inadequate – he replies: 'Here I am, send me!'. 'Here I am, send me!'"

God gives Isaiah the unenviable ministry of preaching to people who are deliberately not listening and deliberately not seeing. 'Prophesy to them ' says God, 'until they are so sick of hearing the truth, that they accept it. Their willingness to see and hear the truth, which will be the beginning their healing' (my paraphrasing.)

It is a healing process, when we accept the truth and ask, 'where do we go from here?' Instead of pretending that everything is fine. In Isaiah, God wants the people to be healed by the truth and to go forward into a new era of growth and prosperity.

In our gospel lesson Jesus invites his disciples to ‘put out into the deep’.

After an unsuccessful night of fishing, Jesus challenged the disciples (experienced fishermen) to try another way of fishing. ‘Put out into the deep’.

In other words, ‘put aside the old way of doing life and put out into the deep’. Leave the safety of the shore and all that is familiar - and try a new way of doing life.

In my experience, people who belong to a church and especially the established churches tend to be pretty conservative (which is both a strength and a weakness).

We don’t like to try new ways of doing life, or new ways of doing Church. Even when Jesus might be saying to us, ‘Leave the safety of the shore/coastline - and launch out into the deep’.

When we reflect on our own lives – it is those times when you have launched out into the deep that have changed your life and helped you to grow. Made you the person you are today.

Some examples of launching out into the deep included: choosing a partner/spouse, or choosing to be divorced after an abusive relationship; choosing an occupation, moving to another country or community, learning another language and about another culture; specializing (narrowing your options) at university of Polytech; going on holiday in a new location. For young people shooting for the stars in a sport or subject you are good at. My coming to Havelock North was for me and my family a launching into the unknown deep.

I don’t know whether that’s been good for the parish. But I have found it a marvellous adventure in faith.

In the social and political spheres, here in Aotearoa NZ, launching out into the deep might mean trying to see the world as Maori see it. Or thinking of new ways that we can be more just and loving.

Maori now own only three percent of the land. Only one or two people of Maori descent have appeared on the NRB Rich List – although some Maori corporations and collectives do appear on that List.

The health, education, average life expectancy and wealth stats all show that Maori are not the privileged group – that some would have us believe they are.

Assimilation has never worked in favour of colonised minorities, anywhere in the world. E.g. the American Indians, Hawaiians, Australian Aboriginals, NZ Maori.

My own Tongan and Samoan ancestors colonized other Pacific Islands in the past. While there was some assimilation – other island nations did not appreciate living under foreign

rulers. They were happy when we left, and returned as friends and not as conquerors. Today we are also Christian-influenced small nations.

The original Waitangi Day was a day of hopes and dreams for Maori and Pakeha. It is a place that still symbolizes hopes and dreams.

It is for us, and future generations to take up the responsibility of building on the good will of our forebears – answering the call – to speak and act truthfully so that the process of healing can begin.

The alternative does not bear thinking about: Division. Hatred. Entrenchment in impossible polarized positions. That is not a way forward for all New Zealanders.

PRAYER

God of all peoples and all places,
whose Spirit hovered over these islands long before our ancestors arrived,
and whose justice and compassion call us still:

Grant us the courage to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi
not only with our words but with our lives.

Stir in us a love that seeks truth,
a humility that listens deeply,
and a resolve that works for justice alongside all who are wronged.

Heal what is broken, restore what has been taken,
and weave us together as partners in hope.

Through Jesus Christ,
who reconciles all creation
and leads us in the way of peace.

Amen.