

Tō mātou tūranga – Our Place, Aotearoa, God’s Place

In the beginning was ‘Te Kore’ the nothingness, an empty place, an empty space. It was cold, intensely cold, bitterly cold. It was dark, the darkness was impenetrable, but over eons of time the dark became less dense, less forbidding and although still a void, light entered that void and Ranginui and Papatuanuku were formed, they cohabited and produced many offspring. This is a very abridged version of the traditional Māori creation story.

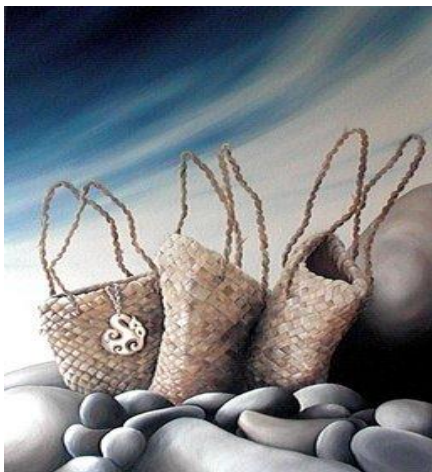
Now the children of Ranginui and Papatuanuku were many, our stories tell us they numbered more than 70. They were uncomfortable trapped as they were between their parents, but they could see chinks of light peeping through beneath their mother’s armpits and, like all children, were curious and wanted to stretch out and see what lay beyond. The children conspired to separate their parents and after much discussion, Tāne was given the task to do just that. Tāne was one of the most senior children and was accredited with a number of tasks, roles and domains over which he had control.

Tāne-toko-i-te-rangi was the name given to him for the task of separating their parents. Tāne-toko-i-te-rangi means ‘Tāne who propped up the sky.’

Tāne was also known as **Tāne-nui-a-rangi** and was responsible for climbing, encountering many obstacles on the way, up to the twelfth heaven and retrieving the ‘three baskets of knowledge’ – te kete tūauri, te kete tūatea, te kete aronui. These kete he returned to the seventh heaven and after undergoing the pōwhiri, the welcome, where purification rites were observed to remove the intense tapu “ingested from his association with the intense sacredness of Io” (Marsden, 2003 p.57), they were deposited in the whare wānanga which was overseen by the wisest seers and sages to be carefully looked after and used only to benefit mankind.



It is through this knowledge set aside in the whare wānanga that humanity, the natural world and all that is within that world is created and understood. **Tāne Matua** is another name reserved for this atua as the ‘father of creation.’



The lessons learned through the exposure to these experiences and the ensuing tikanga or traditional practises that evolved, Walker (1990) suggests, provide the blueprint for the manner in which Māori conduct themselves, their ways of living, their ways of being and knowing, and their ways of understanding God. Some might consider these stories to be the stuff of myth and legend, but the late Rev. Māori Marsden, Anglican Priest and tohunga notes that,

“They were deliberate constructs employed by the ancient seers and sages to encapsulate and condense into easily assimilable forms of their view of the World, of ultimate reality and the relationship between the Creator, the universe and man” (Royal, 2004 p.56) a Māori theology.

One more name that Tāne was known by is **Tāne Māhuta**. Tāne, whose realm is the forest and many of you will know this magnificent kauri that stands in the Waipoua Forest north of the Kaipara. This Tāne is around 2000 years old. There is a fence several metres from the base of the tree which is designed to keep people away from the immediate vicinity and off the roots of the tree, in an effort to prevent damage to Tāne Mahuta. It reports earlier this year was with sadness we note that human ashes were being deposited at the base of Tāne Mahuta. Actions such as these are damaging and offensive to Māori understandings of care and respect for creation, for our own dead and for the living.



One other of Ranginui and Papatuanuku’s children I will mention here is **Tangaroa**, whose domain is the sea and all the earth’s waterways. Tangaroa’s son, **Punga**, had two children, **Ikatere**, the ancestor of fish of the sea, and **Tu-te-wehiwehi** (or Tu-te-wanawana), the ancestor of reptiles. These two ancestors, Tāne and Tangaroa are particularly important for the stories of conservation in this, our place, but it is the stories and experiences such as these that inform and guide our God understandings, in Māori ways, in a Māori context, a Māori theology. So, I repeat, nau mai, nau mai, haere mai, welcome to OUR place, GOD’s place!



In 1840 our ancestors signed Te Tiriti o Waitangi in good faith and had hopes for a union that would honour and respect our ways of being. By the simple act of signing that contract, it also gave permission for the early European settlers, our colonisers, and all others who followed, to reside here, respecting our authority and customary practices. This of course did not eventuate, but in the words of President John in his opening address, “Honouring Te Tiriti requires some putting right” (p.6). In order

to help with some of that “putting right” we, as Te Hāhi Weteriana o Aotearoa, have taken up that challenge as a justice issue and in keeping with John Wesley’s teachings on social justice have made known our commitment to justice in Aotearoa by the inclusion of the Treaty of Waitangi in our Methodist Mission Statement. And, in 1983 we as a church embarked on a bicultural journey in partnership Te Taha Māori with our Tauwiwi sisters and brothers in Christ,

a journey that symbolised the partnership relationship envisaged by our tūpuna who signed Te Tiriti in 1840.

President John in his opening address also noted that as a bicultural church we altered our structures and decision-making processes some years ago to align with this new way of working and being a bicultural church and he asks “But how good have we been at keeping alive the original vision.” So, I ask you now, how deliberate have you been in maintaining that original vision?

This is a question I believe that needs to be addressed by every single group, and every individual who claims this place, who claims membership to this whānau o Te Hāhi Wēteriana o Aotearoa. Do you even know what the vision of the bicultural journey and our bicultural church was about? I suspect that there are many people in our conference today and many more who attended the celebratory karakia on the weekend who do not understand just what this means, on the ground and in practice for what is our bicultural church.

Here’s an example of what I believe is a practice of our church that everyone should know about and understand fully because it is a tangible expression of our bicultural commitment. The pōwhiri is a Māori tikanga, a formal process of recognising and acknowledging the coming together of two peoples, those of the place of gathering and those from elsewhere. It is a process that accords respect that acknowledges the ‘place’ of individuals in the collective and in the coming together. It is a process that allows for our dead to be acknowledged, mourned together, honoured and our celebrations shared in a communal and family way.

At the beginning of our Methodist Conference we acknowledge our coming together since last we met as a collective in the powhiri. Ex President Des Cooper and Ex Vice-President Sue Spindler in the November Touchstone note the importance of that annual gathering together to be again ‘in connexion.’ The pōwhiri is a process that belongs to us all, it’s not just a Taha Māori thing, it is a Hāhi Wēteriana thing.

Each of our iwi has their own kawa or protocols they abide by in the pōwhiri process. Waikato and Ngāti Whatua for instance have some contestable boundaries in Auckland, but their ways of practicing their iwi kawa have discernable differences.

But, we, Te Taha Māori have altered the ways that we conduct the conference ‘pōwhiri’ process, to accommodate and embrace all our church members in celebration of our annual gathering together and we practice a ‘Kawa o te Hāhi Wēteriana o Aotearoa,’ a process that maintains the underlying tenets so important to the understandings of pōwhiri, but one that belongs to and accommodates the whole church, no matter what our ethnic roots may be.

On page 6 in the Conference Handbook 2011, the process for the pōwhiri is clearly outlined beginning with who is understood to be te hunga kāinga or the home people and who are included as manuhiri, or visitors to this place, where people should gather and what is expected by members of each group.

It is disappointing for us to note that in more than 20 years of conducting the pōwhiri at each conference that there are those who still do not appear to understand the importance, of this process, and respect and value it as a taonga that belongs to the whole church. It was an issue that was widely discussed, debated, and reviewed several times before we were able to come to a common mind and adopt this process for use at our annual conference all those years ago.

Perhaps there are members new to our church who simply, do not know. The challenge remains to help them understand, and so who takes responsibility for that?

There are aspects of our life as a bicultural church that we do engage in, that honour respect and accord justice that clearly demonstrates our church's commitment to the Treaty. The "putting right," the addressing of the justice issues that inform our bicultural partnership and bicultural journey are reflected in the way that we work in Council of Conference, in the 5 + 5 process, on Boards and Committees where Te Taha Māori has representation, such as at Trinity and Wesley Colleges, and the various Missions and Ecumenical and Connexional Boards and Committees. We can in these places claim OUR place, all of OUR place, GOD'S place!

The prophet Micah in his quest to do the right thing asks, and I read from the Good News Bible "*What shall I bring to the Lord, the God of heaven, when I come to worship him?*" and the response he offers in Chapter 6 vs.8 is this, "*What he [God] requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God.*"

We live in a multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual society and if anyone ever doubted that then the truly magical, vibrant and energetic celebratory weekend we have just experienced should leave none of us in any doubt about that. Te Taha Māori truly values the richness that cultural diversity brings to this, our church, our place, God's place.

Our church has made the commitment to honour the intent of the Treaty and provide a more just model of bicultural Aotearoa expressed through church. Let us not allow the hard work, the blood, sweat and tears of all those who worked so hard to achieve greater equity and justice for Māori, in this bicultural relationship, become just another token gesture.

The challenge remains to get the words off the paper, out of the rhetoric, into the heart and mind and into action. The very talented Colin Gibson in this hymn echoes this charge and challenges each and every one of us, as individuals, to just begin and put justice into action.

*Let justice roll down like a river, Let justice roll down like a sea
Let justice roll down like a river, Let justice begin through me.*

*Justice for all who are powerless, Yearning for freedom in vain
Plundered and robbed of their birthright, Silently bearing their pain*

References:

- Roberts, J. *Presidential Address* Christchurch, Te Hāhi Wēteriana o Aotearoa.
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Walker, R.J. (1990) *Ka whawhai tonu mātou: struggle without end*. Auckland, Penguin Books.
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