

Views from the Pews: Advent 1 at Saint John's, Te Awamutu

On this Advent Sunday, as we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ's message to the pagan Mediterranean world, we should remember that we also have a well-documented local account of Christianity's arrival among, and acceptance by, a people who were frequently described as 'savages'.

Archbishop David Moxon described the first Anglican church at Te Awamutu in the October Newsletter. Now known as 'Old St John's', it sits beside a critical crossing of the Mangapiko Stream. The current church campus was once part of a larger area that encompassed the Otawhao Mission Station, and St John's is a living reminder of a fascinating and vital chapter in our country's Christian story. The current (1854) church building, the third on the site, was built in response to growing Maori demand for a place of worship.

The story is one of partnership, of free exchange of ideas and technology between people who understood and felt bound by the Waitangi accord. Both languages were used, resources were shared, and there seems to have been a general consensus that a mat with interwoven strands was always going to be stronger than one with just parallel threads.

The missionary experience here was no longer just an experiment, but was still a work in progress. For instance, Maori were expected to attend church in 'European' dress. But the success of the CMS project up to the early 1860's strongly suggests that it was conducted on terms that Maori felt comfortable with.

This may explain the anger and pain still associated with the events of 1864, which saw the withdrawal of some missionaries, the political compromise of others, and St John's becoming a garrison church, catering exclusively to Crown forces and their agents. The CMS project was over, but (thanks to Princess Te Paea) the church survived, to become – as all churches should be – a treasure house of memories and a reminder of what once was and of what might have been. Of particular note are the east windows, which tradition relates were carried from Tauranga on the backs of Maori men. Their service deserves commemoration and reflection.

This is a small building, but it is usually quiet despite the State Highway 3 traffic outside. And it is flooded with light on sunny Sunday mornings. When we last checked, keys are held at the parish office and at the I-Site across the road. Please visit soon.

Richard Swarbrick