

Views from the Pews: Saying Sorry – South Pacific Style

Delta's arrival upstaged an important event in our country's history – the Dawn Raids Apology Ceremony in Auckland. It featured our Prime Minister being covered with a fine mat – surely a symbol of protection and nurture – which was then lifted off her before she offered an oral apology for wrongs committed by the Government against the Pacific Island community in the 1970s. By all accounts, this ceremony conferred freedom and release upon all who attended – Crown as well as victims and their descendants – and conformed to Pacific ideas about confession, absolution, and release from the burden of past sin.

Significantly, it was a corporate event, one in which the wrongdoer is absorbed by and reconnected to his/her people, who in turn share the burden, by lifting it from the wrongdoer's shoulders. The person making confession is readmitted, rather than cast out and disconnected. The ceremony had much in common with Treaty apology/reconciliation processes, where the focus is on the release of past burdens and on a common commitment to a better future. It would also be familiar to participants in a Youth Justice Family Group Conference, with its emphasis on release from sin, reconciliation, and rededication to the future.

These ideas may seem strange to European eyes, and so we ask – are there precedents in the Anglican Liturgy? Yes. The General Confession, as laid out in our 1662 Communion Service, contains remarkable similarities. The Confession is 'made in the name of all those who are minded to receive the Holy Communion'. It reminds us of our humanity, our frailty, and our common failings. It acknowledges sin as a burden.

Sin includes 'all that is past' – suggesting not just what we have failed to do, but what our forebears failed to do. This is critical if we are to embrace the idea that sin continues to be a burden. This is why it seems appropriate to acknowledge wrongs done in (say) the 19th Century as well as in the more recent past. There is a clear reference to 'newness of life'.

But this is not all – Confession is immediately followed by Absolution – with its references to deliverance and to strength in all goodness. And its clear message about the future – not just the past. The Auckland Town Hall was then filled with what Anglicans would recognize as 'Comfortable Words', words that told of release from past burdens, and of the promise of new life.

Richard Swarbrick, with thanks to Hala Rohorua