

Views from the Pews - The Builders of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia

The Revised Common Lectionary (our three-year cycle of readings) sets two alternative scripture readings for today's Eucharist. One is Psalm 126, "A Harvest of Joy: A Song of Ascents", celebrating the goodness of the Lord, which would be appropriate for any Sunday. The alternative reading is from the Book of Sirach, a book found amongst the Deuterocanonical books or Apocrypha, books Luther excluded from the Protestant canon on the basis that no Hebrew version had been found, so it was considered a product of Greek culture. (Anglicans, seeking a middle way, hold that these books are useful for instruction but should not be the basis of doctrine.)

Yet, in the discoveries of both the 1896 Cairo Geniza and the 1950s Dead Sea Scrolls were Hebrew originals for portions Sirach and other books that were, to that point, thought to have been originally written in Greek and that formed part of the Greek canon but not the Hebrew canon. So, we can now be sure they are more ancient texts than we once thought, and it is reasonable to read and learn from this book that is full of wisdom and spiritual value. One of its most famous passages from Sirach is:

Let us now sing the praises of famous men [and women], our ancestors in their generations.... Some of them have left behind a name, so that others declare their praise. (*Sirach 44:15-44*)

These words seem more appropriate for today's optional lectionary theme, the celebration of the founders of our faith in New Zealand and Polynesia.

The Church Missionary Society (CMS) was founded in 1799. At that time only a few Europeans, mainly traders and escaped convicts, were living in or visiting New Zealand. Samuel Marsden, working in New South Wales in 1794, met and hosted many visiting Māori. He judged that they would be receptive to Christianity, so in 1808 he convinced CMS to begin a mission in New Zealand, aiming to organise a Māori version of the Anglican church. Marsden led the first Anglican missionaries to arrive in New Zealand from Australia in 1814. Many others followed. William Hall, John King, and Thomas Kendall introduced Māori to the Western innovations of literacy, agriculture and trade. Henry and William Williams, both fluent in te reo, developed a te reo-English dictionary in 1844, and helped to persuade Māori to sign the Treaty of Waitangi. Missionary wives created a more stable community with neat cottages, schools and medical care.

The early founders of our faith had a huge impact on the lives and spiritual beliefs of Māori. The church grew as white settlers moved to the country, and in 1857 it adopted its own constitution and became an independent church.

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