

Sermon – January 29th 2017
The Story of Parihaka

I wonder if you have you ever had a time in your life when a certain idea or story or verse comes up in some way in your life several times over a period of time? And you think, is this just a co-incidence or is God maybe trying to tell me something? Or is there something he wants me to do with this... Well, I have had that happen to me over the last 18 months... and I agree with Philip Yancy who said 'co-incidences are actually God-incidences.'

Today I am going to tell you a story. It's a story some of you may know, but some of you may not know... it's a story that is from NZ's history and I believe it is an important story for us to know, both as NZers and as Christians... it's a story that teaches us about God and the way he works in our lives and in the world, and it's a story which can inspire us as followers of God – about doing the right thing even when its hard and difficult and it costs us a lot.

Children are present in our service today... that is appropriate because this story also involves children. So children, this is a story you can listen to and I also need your help. But this is a story for all of us...

I want to take you back to New Zealand in the 1860s. *How many years ago was that? Do you think anyone from that time is here today?* It was a difficult time in our history, a time of the NZ wars between Pakeha, who wanted land to settle on and farm and Maori who owned the land, and this led to conflict and broken promises and fighting. There was violence on both sides and people died.

But there were two men who had experienced the killing and decided on a different path. One was called Te Whiti o Rongomai (slide 1), and here is a

sketch of him... and the other was Tohu Kakahi (Slide 2). These men had heard the gospel of Jesus and been baptised, and they were particularly influenced by what the Bible has to say about peace. They liked the words of Jesus, when he said (slide 3a) 'blessed are the peacemakers' and (slide 3b) 'if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.' Te Whiti is recorded as saying (slide 4), 'it is not my wish that evil should come to the two races. My wish is for the whole of us to live peaceably and happily on the land.' So, with this vision, Te Whiti and Tohu started a settlement in Taranaki, called Parihaka. (slide 5) Old photos. Parihaka became a gathering place for people who wanted a different response than violence.... And the village grew until it had over 2000 inhabitants, from various different tribes and from all over the country. Many had lost their land and wanted a new home, somewhere to belong and be safe.

The story goes, that one morning a large albatross (Slide 6) flew down and landed on the marae at Parihaka and left a white feather behind. Maori believed that an albatross was a chiefly bird, with a lot of mana... so they believed this was a sign from God that the people should listen to Te Whiti and Tohu. And the white feather or raukura, (Slide 7) became an important symbol for the people of Parihaka – a symbol of peace.

I have a white feather for you all this morning... and the children are going to help me hand them out... quietly and quickly.

As we continue the story of Parihaka this morning, I encourage you to hold your feather, look at it, touch it... and ask God to speak to you through this story. So the thing that united the people of Parihaka, was their belief that there was a better way to resist the people who were trying to take their land from them, and they made a conscious decision to put aside revenge and

violence, and to practise passive resistance. So what did this passive resistance look like?

When the government surveyors planted pegs in the ground to mark out the land they wanted to take for farms, Te Whiti's followers would pull them out again and plough over the land. As fast as the government troops pulled down Parihaka's fences in order to build a road across their land, the men of Parihaka rebuilt them and replanted the crops that had been trampled. When the police arrived to arrest them, they just stood silently, without resisting. 137 men were sent to Dunedin as prisoners and put to hard labour.

Eventually though, the government had enough and on November 5th 1881, the soldiers were sent in. (Slide 8) 1500 men marched into Parihaka, ready for a fight. Armed with muskets and extra ammunition. They were expecting a bloody battle. But Te Whiti had heard that the soldiers were coming and so late into the night his people got ready. *Do you know how they got ready?* They baked bread for the soldiers who were coming to invade them.

When the soldiers arrived they saw a group of children, playing games and singing songs. One of the soldiers wrote that the troops were confronted by about 200 little boys who danced splendidly and the next line of defence was formed by 60 girls with skipping ropes. (Slide 10) The children were wearing raukura, white feathers in their hair as a sign of peace. They offered the soldiers the bread they had baked. The adults sat on the ground in the middle of the marae in silence...

What did the soldiers do? What do you hope they did? At first they didn't know what to do! But eventually they arrested the men and took them to prison, they took anything that was valuable, they killed the livestock, they destroyed the village and they took the land... It may not seem like this was a victory for

peace, but not a single person lost their life that day. Te Whiti knew if the people of Parihaka had fought back, people would certainly have died.

It may not seem like Parihaka is a story about peace overcoming... Yes, nobody died and that is significant but the people lost their ancestral land and to this day it is a poor community... and I wonder if like me, you question how God could let this happen to people who were his followers, living out the spirit of the gospel in difficult circumstances? Doing the right thing...but they lost their land anyway.

But the story of Parihaka doesn't end there. It is like a pebble dropped in a lake. *What happens when you drop a pebble into a lake?* There are ripples... and there are ripples from this story.

Hands up if you had heard of Te Whiti and Tohu before today? Hands up if you have heard of Gandhi? And Martin Luther King Jr? As incredible as it may seem, Gandhi who was a teenager when Parihaka happened, learned of this story. There was a Baptist minister called JJ Doke, who served at Oxford Tce Baptist church in Christchurch between 1894 and 1901. He left NZ and went to serve in South Africa... where he developed a friendship with Gandhi who also spent time there. He shared the story of Parihaka with him... and let me read you this quote from an academic journal written by Dr Rachel Buchanan, a lecturer at a university in Melbourne. (slide 10) "Gandhi's grandson has recently confirmed what had often been wondered, that what Gandhi had learnt about Parihaka helped as he developed his pacifist understandings." Gandhi is considered one of the world's most important and influential promoters of peace and passive resistance and he was inspired by the story of Parihaka. A ripple... Gandhi has influenced peace around the world, and was a major inspiration for the work of Martin Luther King Jr (slide 11) who wrote

that he was, “The guiding light of our technique of non-violent social change” – another ripple.

In 2003 Parihaka was visited by an international delegation of representatives of peace movements, including descendants of MLK and MG, and they were gifted a peace medal to acknowledge the contribution of Tohu and Te Whiti to the cause of peace.

For me this illustrates an important principle about how our God works... if we do the right thing, if we stand up for God’s way, we don’t always get rewarded in the way we might expect or hope, we might be hurt, we might be abused... but God sees the big picture and he can use all things for good. The residents of Parihaka who were there in 1881, didn’t live to see how God was going to use their story to impact the world... and sometimes we won’t see the future ripples of our choices and decisions either. But God does and he is still in control...

I wonder what God is saying to you this morning? Phil is going to come and pray... and then we are going to have a time of reflection and worship. As you look at your feather and as you think about God and the story of Parihaka, as you think about peace, both in your own life and in the world, how do you want to respond? Feel free to sit or stand, to sing or be still... to pray or to listen...

Prayer (slide 12)

Songs

Conclusion: (Slide 13) There is a statue at Parihaka today, which has three white feathers on it and the words, “Glory to God on high, peace on earth and goodwill to all mankind.”

I will leave you with the words from the prayer:

How can we be instruments of peace? What do we need to do?

Come together, Talk together, Walk together, Work together

Go in peace...