



# Samuel Marsden and the beginning of the New Zealand Mission

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This year marks the bicentenary of the CMS mission to New Zealand, beginning Christmas Day, 1814. The story of the New Zealand mission is a story of friendship and trust overcoming mutual misunderstanding and fear. It is a very human story of Missionary and Maori forbearing one another; tolerating, cajoling and forgiving one another; challenging each other, even threatening each other, but also laughing together at, and with, each other—holding in there together and thus creating the space for a far more remarkable story to take root in New Zealand soil: the story of Te Rongopai o Ihu Karaiti, the Gospel of Jesus Christ; Te Kaiwhakaora mō te iwi katoa, the Saviour for all people.

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In marking this bicentenary year and looking particularly at the circumstances of that first Church Service, there are three significant themes that I wish to highlight. Firstly, that the mission was founded upon mutual hospitality; secondly, that the mission was Gospel centred; and lastly, that the beginning of the mission was marked by celebration.

## Mutual Hospitality

The NZ mission was the culmination of a 20-year dream for Samuel Marsden. As the senior chaplain to the penal colony in New South Wales, he had seen these Māori adventurers arriving at the docks of Port Jackson having jumped on board passing ships. He would collect them and take them further up the harbour to Parramatta where he hosted them on his farm. There, Māori were able to receive instruction in agriculture and its attendant industries. But they were also able to observe

his way of life, and his manner of worship. It was in Parramatta that Māori first heard about the Christian Gospel.

Marsden, for his part, was able to observe the qualities of his Māori guests. Marsden's conclusion was that,

The natives of New Zealand are far advanced in civilization, and apparently prepared for receiving the knowledge of Christianity more than any savage nation I have seen. Their habits of industry are very strong and their thirst for knowledge great. They only want the means.

It was this assessment that led to his trip to England in 1807 and formed the basis of his proposal to CMS to establish a mission in New Zealand. The mission was not to be imposed on Māori but to be established with the cooperation and patronage of local Māori Rangatira. It is here that Ruatara becomes so significant. Marsden had first met Ruatara as the travelling companion of Te Pahi, his uncle, on his visit to Sydney in 1805. Marsden again encountered Ruatara on his return trip from England in 1809 as a fellow passenger on board the *Ann*. At that time Ruatara was very ill and was nursed back to health by Marsden and the ship's surgeon. Ruatara's keen interest in agriculture and strict observance of the Sabbath, made him in Marsden's mind the ideal patron for the new Mission.

Ruatara had glimpsed something of what was possible for his own people in the Bay of Islands. This was not an easy vision to sell. He had returned with wheat seed to plant, which he distributed to his friends. When it was sprouted and grown green and tall, his friends pulled it all up expecting to find the fruit at its root, as with Kumara or Ferns. Finding nothing, however, they discounted the experiment as yet another of Ruatara's stories. All, that is expect Hongi Hika. Hongi brought his crop through to harvest. But people still could not believe that the resulting seeds could be turned into bread, and despite being able to borrow a pepper mill from a ship anchored in the bay, Ruatara was not able to provide a definitive demonstration.

Ruatara's friendship with Marsden, however, was sufficiently strong for him to accept Marsden's invitation to make a return visit to Parramatta along with Hongi Hika and Korokoro, and consequently to accept Marsden's proposal of a missionary settlement in the Bay of Islands.

Marsden returned with them to the Bay of Islands along with the three missionary families of Kendal, Hall and King. The three chiefs returned with a number of gifts, including military uniforms given to them by Governor Lachlan Macquarie as a mark of his respect for their chiefly status. Korokoro was so impressed by the Governor that, in customary Māori fashion, he proposed a change of name. Their ship, the *Active*, arrived off Hohi Bay, beside Ruatara's Pā at Rangihoua just before Christmas Day, 1814. Hohi Bay being the local Māori name for what later became known as Oihi bay.

As well as exchanging gifts, including presenting Ruatara's head-wife, Rahu, with a red gown and petticoat from Marsden's wife, Elizabeth, Marsden unloaded a number of cows and horses, causing a sensation amongst the locals. They had heard stories from Ruatara, as he attempted to explain to them a horse and carriage—'It's a four-legged animal like a dog or pig,' said Ruatara, 'only big enough for a man to ride on its back. And these animals are used to pull 'land canoes'', he said, 'in which people ride.' Some had stuck their fingers in their ears and refused to listen, others attempted to mount some nearby pigs to ride them as Ruatara described, only to be thrown off into the dirt and for everyone to fall about laughing. Yet now, Ruatara was vindicated, as Marsden astonished everyone by mounting one of the horses and riding up and down the beach.

On Christmas Eve, Korokoro, or as he now wished to be called, Governor Macquarie, returned from the south side of the Bay with 200 of his warriors to provide a formal welcome party for the new settlers. They gathered the Europeans from their ship and made for the shore. Ruatara was ready with his men, though only one warrior could be seen prancing up and down the beach. After a stirring haka, Korokoro's warriors rush ashore chasing the lone toa off the beach only to be met

by Ruatara's men descending upon them down the valley. A furious mock-fight ensued until all were exhausted. John Nicholas, one of the observers, marvelled at Rahu, Ruatara's wife, in the thick of the fight, in her new red dress, banishing a large horse-pistol. With everyone's energy expended, the welcome concluded with haka and food. A fitting tribute to the new mission that was founded on the principles of friendship, trust, welcome and hospitality.

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### **Gospel Centred**

The second significant theme is that the mission was Gospel centred. Though, the way some recent scholars speak, you would be forgiven for not knowing that the New Zealand mission had anything to do with religion. In their re-telling of the story, it was all about the establishment of the first school in New Zealand by Thomas Kendal. However, the story cannot be told without the Gospel at its heart.

Ruatara, after the formal welcome, spent the rest of Christmas Eve making preparations for the next day. It was all his own initiative: he knew that the next day was the Sabbath, the Rātapu. He enclosed 1/2 an acre of land with a fence, built a readers desk and pulpit and covered them with black flax cloth. He even provided pews for the Pākehā—planks supported by upturned canoes. By these preparations it is clear that Ruatara intended the gathering the next day to be a fully-fledged service of Christian worship, as he had experienced them at Parramatta.

On Christmas morning, the Union Jack flew from the top of Rangihoua Pā to signal the day. When the missionary party arrived on shore they took their seats either side of the pulpit. Then Korokoro marched in his men on the left, and Ruatara, the

same on the right. Surrounding them all were the local people of the Pā. The three chiefs, Ruatara, Hongi and Korokoro, were dressed in their regimentals, swords by their sides.

The Service began with the old 100th. Based on Psalm 100, it is one of the oldest hymns in the English language (1561), written by a Scotsman in exile in Geneva. But a most appropriate hymn for the occasion, as it invites ‘all people’ to join with the ‘angelic host’ in joyful praise to God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Service was read—people standing or sitting as directed by Korokoro with a baton.

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Then Samuel Marsden rose to deliver his sermon. His text was Luke 2:10, ‘Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy.’ What a great Gospel text! It concerns the ‘good tidings’, te rongo pai. What a great mission text! For the good tidings are for ‘all people’, te iwi katoa.

Ever since James Belich’s history, *Making Peoples*, it’s been popular to claim that in fact no sermon was preached that day. It’s not denied that Marsden rose to speak, but that Ruatara’s words that followed were not at all a translation of what was said. They were more by way of a reassurance to Māori that their display of earnest attention would be amply rewarded by the riches of missionary trade. The assumption being that Marsden spoke solely in English, leaving the vast majority of those present none the wiser. ‘There was no sermon!’ claims Alison Jones and Kuni Jenkins in their book, *Words Between Us*. Instead, they prefer to call the whole Service ‘an important instructional event’—‘a political meeting essential for the education of the people’.

There are a number of things wrong with this point of view. Let me list four. Firstly, it shares the same

pedigree as that line of argument that wishes to contest the status of the first Service to be held in New Zealand. They labour a point that makes no difference. No one wishes to deny that there were other acts of Christian worship that occurred in and around New Zealand waters before this time. But they all lack the element of intentionality that properly belongs to this event. *This* was the Service that marked the beginning of Christian mission in New Zealand. *This* was the sermon preached at *that* Service—even if only a few could comprehend it. It was Marsden’s intention that he should preach a sermon, and Ruatara’s intention (as his preparations demonstrated) that Māori would hear a sermon. So despite the naysayers, there was a sermon that Christmas morning!

Secondly, and more importantly, it makes the mistaken assumption that Marsden had little, if any, facility in te reo Māori. It is known that this was not the case. Marsden had been in contact with Māori from the beginning of his time in NSW, but undertook more intensive language study, with Ruatara as his tutor, during their 5-month return voyage from England five years before. At that stage, Marsden claimed that he could speak to Ruatara ‘on any common subject and can make myself clearly understood.’ He only wished that William Hall and John King had taken a similar advantage of the opportunity that was presented (Kendall and his family were to arrive in Sydney a little later). Marsden was fully cognisant of the importance to the mission of his own ability to speak the language and consequently was a motivated learner.

Thirdly, even if Marsden didn’t utilise Māori during his sermon, he certainly had enough knowledge of the language to be aware of what Ruatara was saying by way of interpretation. So, to argue that Ruatara ignored Marsden’s spiritual message and instead interposed his own more political agenda is not at all convincing. Besides which, it ignores the trust that had developed between Marsden and Ruatara over the five years of their friendship.

Fourthly, as we will see a little later on, Ngā Puhi oral tradition suggests that Māori did in fact appreciate the spiritual significance of what was occurring. It wasn’t just about trade goods, even if Māori couldn’t fully appreciate what Marsden

was saying. If, as we are rightly told, Māori of this period had an all-embracing spiritual worldview, how can it then be expected that Māori received the missionaries on such secular terms? No, Ngā Puhī accounts of that day indicate that Māori paid great attention to the spiritual significance of what was coming among them.

## Two Questions

So, did Marsden preach in Māori? And what do we know of the sermon's message?

Firstly, did Marsden preach in Māori? David Pettett, an Australian scholar undertaking doctoral research on Marsden's sermons, makes the case that yes, in fact, he did. And the case for saying so is much stronger than you might think!

We have three eyewitness accounts of what happened: John Nicholas (Marsden's companion on the trip who kept a detailed journal that he later published); John King (one of the three settler missionaries who wrote a letter a few weeks later), and Marsden himself. None of these sources rule out the possibility that Marsden spoke in Māori, and at various points provide us with positive indications that he did. For instance, we learn from Marsden's journal that he was interrupted during the sermon by Maori speaking to Ruatara and saying, (in Marsden's words) 'they could not understand what I *meant*.' It may have been due to his accent, or his grammar, or his subject matter, but it is an altogether odd interjection to make if Marsden was speaking in English, a language that Māori were not expected to understand at all.

Over the years, the various missionaries were generally able to quickly pick up a level of 'trade' Māori sufficient for day-to-day co-existence, usually within the first year after their arrival. So there is no difficulty in maintaining that Marsden, with a 10-20 year exposure to the language, had at least this level of proficiency, if not far more. He was probably among the best European speakers of te reo Māori in the colony at the time. It was the later challenge of translating the scriptures that really tested the missionaries' facility with the language. For Marsden to preach at least part of his sermon in Māori would have been difficult, but not impossible.

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Turning to our second question, what do we know of the sermon's content?

There are three extant sermons by Marsden on this verse, but unfortunately none of them appear to be the one preached on this occasion. Most probably, Marsden spoke extemporarily and had few if any notes. However, David Pettett has assembled a reconstruction of the sermon in outline, based on the three known manuscripts. If nothing else, it highlights the strongly expositional nature of Marsden's preaching. Comparing themes from each of the sermons, he thinks Marsden could have made any, or all, of the following eight points:

1. The birth of Christ is the most important event the world has ever seen.
2. It is good tidings of great joy for all people.
3. This event has been long and anxiously expected by the faithful.
4. Those who are awaiting a temporal messiah will be disappointed because this Messiah brings spiritual blessings.
5. This event has been announced with great rejoicing by the angels of heaven who have declared a Saviour for mankind.
6. This Messiah was not born in a palace, but a stable, making him accessible to all people.
7. This is the superior Saviour because he defeats the Evil One and saves from Hell.
8. Now is the time to follow this Saviour because you may not be alive next Christmas season.

What these eight points demonstrate, was that Marsden was not setting up a school, nor was he advocating some simple equation that civilisation would lead to Christianisation. What is clear is that Marsden intended for the New Zealand mission to

be firmly centred on the Gospel, and for education and the 'arts' of civilisation to go hand-in-hand with seeking the conversion of Māori to Christ.

The New Zealand mission was founded on mutual hospitality and it was Gospel-centred. The last significant theme that I would like to highlight is that the beginning of the mission was marked by celebration.

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### **Celebration**

Once the Service was finished, the Europeans proceeded out of the enclosure only to be startled by a haka from the 400 warriors present. Although for the Europeans it was a rather surprising, though welcome, end to the Service, it was a perfectly fitting response for Māori to make, given what had occurred over the previous three days. It was the culmination of their reception for this rather 'strange tribe' of missionaries who had come into their midst. Patricia Bawden in her book, *The Years Before Waitangi*, makes mention of a Ngā Puhi tradition concerning the words to that

haka passed on to her by Sir James Henare. More recently, the Anglican bishop Te Kiohi Pikaahu, the bishop responsible for the Hui Amorangi of Te Tai Tokerau (which extends over the area of Northland for Tikanga Māori) has corroborated this tradition. Namely, that the words of the haka performed that day referred to the coming of the Pipiwhararuroa, the shining cuckoo, a migratory bird whose piercing cry announces the arrival of spring.

Songs were (and are) very important to Māori and carried great significance. The sharing of a song was sufficient to forge new alliances or call allies together for war. So, the oral tradition concerning the words of this haka confirms that Māori were well aware of the welcome they were extending to Marsden and the missionaries. But more importantly, it was a haka that sounded a true note of celebration, heralding the dawn of a new partnership between Māori and Pākehā established upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

When Marsden had returned to the *Active*, he wrote these words in his diary:

In the above manner the Gospel has been introduced into New Zealand, and I fervently pray that the glory of it may never depart from its inhabitants till time shall be no more.

May this too be our prayer for 2014, as we celebrate two hundred years of Gospel ministry in New Zealand.