



Living the Treaty
Rev Richard Bonifant

Year A, Ordinary 5

Isaiah 58:1-9a, Matthew 5: 13-20

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All buildings tell a story. Some buildings become well known for the stories they tell and become places of tourism or even of pilgrimage. Some of us here will have travelled great distances to see places, the Eiffel tower in Paris, the leaning tower of Pisa, or the Taj Mahal in India. Closer to home we have iconic structures such as the Beehive in Wellington, and dare I say it, the Sky Tower looming over us next door. Perhaps you are more interested in famous ruins such as the colosseum in Rome, or Angkor Wat in Cambodia. There are remnants of other constructions here in Aotearoa that are also very interesting. As a child I frequently visited the remains of Te Porere Redoubt on the central plateau where Te Kooti held out against government forces. It was here that I began to learn some of the stories of the New Zealand wars and how they continue to shape our history.

All of these places and structures and many others tell us about human history, ambition and progress. There are buildings that tell violent stories, and some that were created as monuments to love. Some buildings inspire us with their grandeur, while others speak of humble beginnings.

Like other buildings, this church tells many stories also. Like many churches, the original plans for this building would have created a footprint in the shape of the cross. However, that design would not have fitted the land available for this building which is why we ended up with these wide side aisles that were not originally intended to be built. This church is built from limestone, one of only a handful of buildings in this country to be built from such materials. The vaulted roof is uncommon in this part of the world, and much more reminiscent of great cathedrals in Europe. The intention of such a design is to convey a sense of awe, the idea that we are very small, and God is very big. It just so happens that

this vaulted roof also enhances the acoustics of this space, making it the perfect venue for all kinds of music.

If you read the different plaques, or look at the different windows or pieces of art, you will find stories of all sorts of different people whose lives are in some way connected to this place. We even have memorials from those who died in wars as well as those who died from HIV-AIDS in the time before new treatments changed the trajectory of that pandemic.

Our Instagram account regularly shares stories of today. Weddings, concerts, and many other special occasions are an ongoing part of the story of this place as well. And there are the memories of so many people. Memories of services, memorials, protests, and controversial billboards. They are all part of our story.

But there are stories we may not feel so comfortable with as well. Having been here for almost two years now, I have heard stories from a number of visitors to this church, that aren't as easy to talk about as the stories I have just touched on. For some in our community this church is a symbol of colonisation. For them this distinctly European architecture that was imported from the other side of the world by people who immigrated here, is a constant reminder there was a time in this country's history where such things did not exist. Some understand the story of this building as one of other cultures dominating and suppressing the indigenous people of Aotearoa. And there is a fair point there, because the history of Christianity in this land is wrapped up with the history of people coming from another part of the world and imposing their world view upon people who were already here.

As an Anglican Priest, of Pākehā descent, that is a story I have struggled to listen to in the past. I have inherited a bunch of cultural baggage that wants to explain away the harm of colonisation. In my haste to move past stories that challenged what my understanding of history was, I mistakenly suggested that my ancestors came to this land with good intentions, with little to no awareness of the colonial project of which they were part. The mistake here is that we cannot simply explain away the past, but more than that, such stories which can appear reasonable, are actually unreasonable because they silence the voices of indigenous people.

The point I am wishing to make, is that there are many stories in this place, some that are easily told. In fact, some stories, like our history of protest, are so good we don't just tell them, we shout them from the rooftops. But some stories, like the story of colonisation, are difficult, they are uncomfortable, and they require much more of us. The first and most important part of that process is that we listen to such stories. As a community we need to make room for all the different stories of this place, and to treat them with equal reverence. Because they are all part of the fabric of who we are. The truth of who we are is not only found in the stories we like to tell, but through all the diverse stories attached to this place. To try to convince ourselves or others that there is only one true story about this community and what we stand for, is itself an act of colonisation, because that is what colonisation does. Colonisation upholds one world view, one way of being, one version of the truth, and imposes it upon all people.

But knowing that gives us an alternative. Instead of imposing one way of being, we can celebrate many ways of being. Instead of seeking to convince and convert, we can listen and be transformed ourselves. Instead of preserving past understandings, we can interrogate them, deconstruct them, and find new ways to move into the future. To engage with the world in this way is to transform who we are, so that we become a decolonising church. A church that truly becomes a place for all. A truly decolonising church is one that doesn't simply claim to honour the treaty and the principles of partnership it embodies; we have to be brave enough to live that commitment. Last year our opposition to the treaty principles bill was a good start. But the work of listening to our treaty partners and seeking to uphold the partnership is ongoing, because such challenges will come again. And with such challenges will come opportunities. Opportunities to live partnership by honouring the treaty. But that work begins with this community looking in the mirror, and daring to ask ourselves what can we do better. Amen.