



Rev Helen Jacobi

Our land?

Ordinary Sunday 5/Waitangi Day

Isaiah 6:1-8

Luke 5:1-11

6 February 2022

Every Waitangi Day our thoughts turn to our nation of Aotearoa and our ideals of partnership, and of rangatiratanga. We all have so much to learn still of our own history.

Over the summer Stephen and I listened to some of the RNZ series on the NZ Wars¹ that came out between 2017 and 2021. Mihingarangi Forbes does an amazing job of storytelling. The series reminded me again of the need to know our history and to be aware of our church's role in the lives of settlers and Maori alike in the 19th century.

There are many different versions of the stories of the missionaries and early Maori evangelists out there and I thought the RNZ series did a great job of prioritising the Maori voice and understanding the complexities of the missionaries and their place in our history.

Last year when I broke my ankle and the lockdown followed I spent some time reading and researching the story of the land here, that our church sits on.

Waitangi Day seems a good day to share some of that story.

On the first of November 1843 Bishop George Selwyn, the first Bishop of NZ, was granted the land here on the corner of Hobson and Wellesley Sts by the Crown.

The deed of grant says the land is *"To be used as a Site for the erection of a Church and Chapel for the celebration of Divine Service according to the*

¹ <https://www.rnz.co.nz/nzwars>

rites of the United Church of England and Ireland as by Law established and to be devoted when consecrated to Ecclesiastical purposes for Ever.”

The Crown of course had been gifted the land in the whole of central Auckland by Ngati Whatua, only 3 years earlier in 1840, the year of the signing of the Treaty. By 1843 the land of central Auckland had been divided up and sold, or in our case, given. The site for St Paul’s and St Mary’s (cathedral now) were also given to Bishop Selwyn at that time.

Selwyn said in a letter to England in 1842 “I have obtained an excellent site on the Western Ridge, on which I intend as soon as possible to build a wooden chapel; and to lay the foundation of a Church on a grand scale, to be proceeded with as Funds can be obtained.”²

By 1848 a “schoolroom” that was actually quite large was built and by 1853 the parish was formally established and the first vicar Rev Frederick Thatcher was appointed. He was also an architect and immediately established a fund for the raising of money for a stone church.³ In the meantime the wooden church was opened in 1863, next to us on the site of the carpark. The parsonage was behind the schoolroom.⁴

What about before 1843? What was here? As far as we can tell the land on this ridge was not occupied in the sense of being a site of a village or a pa. The closest village was down the hill a little, roughly where St Patrick’s Cathedral is now, called Nga Wharau a Tako.

Queen St was of course where the Wai horotiu stream flowed and there were gardens at various points including down where the Aotea Centre is now, and up the slope towards us.

This ridge line is thought to have been a walking track from Karangahape Rd down to the harbour and back.

Once the settlement of Auckland began to grow then the houses and shops did extend this far but at first this site would have been on the edge

² letter quoted in A Controversial Churchman; Essays on George Selwyn, Bishop of New Zealand and Lichfield, and Sarah Selwyn ed Allan K Davidson 2011 Bridget Williams Books

³ p 165 An Excellent Recruit – Frederic Thatcher: Architect and Private Secretary in Early New Zealand Margaret H Alington 2007 Polygraphia Ltd.

⁴ p149 op cit

of things. Selwyn chose prominent hill tops for his churches and expected the people to come to the beacons on the hills.

Opposite us where Sky City is now, was where Fort Ligar was built, or partially built at least in 1845, in response to various fears related to the NZ Wars and possible “invasions” of Auckland.⁵ It seems the fears were not held too strongly as the fort was never finished. But this shows the tension and uncertainty that was present in Tamaki Makaurau in those early years.

What story I wonder can our land tell us? What can we imagine might have happened here before the coming of the settlers? This land has not passed through many hands over the decades. It has not been bought and sold. We can reach directly back to our ancestor Selwyn, and we can wonder about our other ancestors who walked the tracks past our doors.

Lucy Mackintosh in her wonderful new book Shifting Grounds: Deep Histories of Tāmaki Makarau Auckland⁶ says “places are not empty, fixed locations on a map, but rather can be analysed as sites of power, oppression, privilege and exclusion.”⁷ What story can this land tell us of power, oppression, privilege and exclusion?

What story does this very European stone church tell about the colonial claiming of land and the need to have a church like in England. We love our stones, our windows, the colours and the light; we love the arches and the shapes – there is nothing wrong with that.

But even in 1905 when this building opened I wonder what our Ngati Whatua ancestors would have thought of the solid permanence of this stonework; claiming this land for ever, as the deed of grant stated.

We are hoping that this year will finally be the year when we upgrade our gardens all around the church. As we explore what we might do we will want to try and reach back into our past and tell the story of the land as it was in 1843 and earlier.

Next year 2023 will 180 years since Selwyn was given the land. It will be 170 years since the parish was established. And 160 years since the

⁵ “Rediscovering Fort Ligar” Ian Smith, University of Otago 1989

⁶ 2021 Bridget Williams Books

⁷ p9 op cit

wooden church was built. So 2023 will be a year perhaps when we can mark those anniversaries.

I know some of you have been reading the book Imagining Decolonisation (BWB Texts, 2020) and in it Moana Jackson says he would like to replace the concept of “decolonisation” with an ethic of restoration.

“The building of new relationships and the telling of new stories begins with the identification and ‘un-telling’ of colonisation’s past and present lies. Stories for and about transformation rely on honesty about the misremembered stories and the foresight to see where different stories might lead. That is the ethic of restoration.”⁸

What paths to restoration might we begin to walk down as we wonder about our land and its story?

What new abundance might we find, like the overflowing nets of today’s gospel reading?

What call of Jesus might we follow as we think about our land and start a new relationship with our neighbours at HomeGround?

What do we think about the relative wealth of our church over 180 years when our tikanga Maori partners still struggle to find stipends for more than a few clergy?

These are some of the questions that will arise when we bring the gospel into conversation with our history.

I look forward to discovering what further questions and conversations we might have as we give thanks for Aotearoa, for our imperfect partnership of cultures, and our ongoing call to live out the demands of the gospel in this place.

⁸ p154