

Sermon Leith Valley March 22 2020 Deep Roots

We had a Norwegian student living with us for a year. Whenever she was facing something that was a challenge, she would tell herself that she was a Viking. That was her place to stand. Then she could go and meet the challenge.

It is commonly said that point of history is to learn from our mistakes. (If that were the case then history has not been very effective.) I am not sure that that is the main point of history at all, certainly not the main point of history as it connects with us. It seems to me that history is more about our identity. It's a narrative or set of stories that tell us about ourselves and help us to understand what has shaped us and our communities. It holds our story.

Both of our Bible readings this morning, are concerned with the passing on of history - of stories of important events- to others. There is a concern that the stories and their meanings are not lost. In the reading from Joshua, the Israelites, after a generation of wilderness wandering, have finally made it across the Jordan River into Canaan. They build 2 cairns, one in the river and one on the Canaan bank to mark the momentous occasion when they as a people walked into what God had promised them. The cairns are put there as a physical reminder to the people, of that defining day when the future changed and the promise became reality. The cairns were also there to prompt the adults to pass the story down to generations to come, so that those coming after would also learn of the faithfulness of God and know whom they belonged to.

The Corinthian church had fallen into bad habits when it came to celebrating communion. The things that were happening were undermining the whole point of communion. Paul goes over the story of Jesus' last meal with his disciples, once more with the Corinthians. He reminds them that this story of love and unity in Christ needs to be celebrated in a way that reflects that. Paul is passing on the story which has been passed on to him, and he is wanting to make sure that the significance of the story, as well as the story itself, isn't lost.

We have our family stories, we have our national and cultural stories. We Christians have stories that reach back millenia and yet God speaks through them to us, today. These ancient/ present stories tell us who we are, tell us the hope that is ours in Jesus and the hope we hold up as a light to the world.

My Christian sisters and brothers, we are part of a very large and very ancient story. We have deep roots, and in times of crisis and anxiety, deep roots are a very valuable gift. They mean we are less likely to get knocked over by the crisis of the moment.

Each Sunday (up till now), we are accustomed to gather and to listen and reflect on the Bible. But the church has been around for two thousand years, and the stories of church communities and individuals are also part of our legacy - some good, some not so good. Today I want to offer you some of the good - a double story from the history

library of the Christian church. It comes from our section of that library, the New Zealand section. In fact if you have any Scottish blood in your veins or other Presbyterian connection, even if it is a long way back, you have a further link to this story -it is from your family section of the library – the bit that, if you like, holds your grandparent's and great grandparent's photo albums and diaries.

The Presbyterian church in New Zealand started as a settler church rather than a missionary one. That didn't mean that it wasn't interested in mission. By the first quarter of the 20th century the church had overseas missionaries active in places like North India and China. It also had a proactive Maori Mission Committee.



The 2 people I want to talk about this morning were involved with that committee. Their names were Sister Annie Henry and Rev John Laughton. They were both brought up south of the Waitaki. Annie was born in 1879 in Riverton and educated there, She probably rolled her 'r's. John spent his adolescence just over the hill in East Taieri. He did a BA through Otago and then did some training to become a Presbyterian Home Missionary. A few years later he was accepted as a Presbyterian minister.

Annie trained as a teacher, taught for a bit, then moved to the North Island where she was involved in children and family and youth ministries. She had a year in Taumaranui as a matron of agricultural boarding school for Maori boys. Then she came south to Dunedin and did deaconess training from 1915-1916. Women in those days couldn't become Presbyterian ministers. During her time at Deaconess College, she started learning Te Reo. At the beginning of 1917, in the middle of World War One, at the age of 37, Sister Annie Henry joined the staff of the Maori Mission Committee. She was appointed to be a missionary to the Tuhoe people of the Urewera. She was to be based at Ruatahuna.

Tuhoe leaders had been petitioning the government to establish a school to serve the region for a number of years.

Relationships between Tuhoe and the government were rocky. Things had come to a head *just a year* before Annie's arrival in the district. It was wartime, and while Maori weren't conscripted many volunteered. The Maori prophet, Rua Kenana, had his base at Maungapohatu deep in the Urewera and he had gathered a community around him. He was pacifist and discouraged his people from enlisting to fight.

With the Covid 19 threat at the moment, we are seeing something of the rumours and misinformation that fly around, and the suspicion of outsiders that surfaces more strongly when communities are anxious or feel themselves under threat. This happens in times of war as well as in times of pestilence. Fearful of what was going on at Maungpohatu and suspicious of Rua and his community, 70 armed policemen stormed the pa and arrested Rua and carted him off to prison. Rua was unarmed.

Some trigger-happy members of the constabulary fired shots and 2 Maori were killed, one of them Rua's own son Toko, and the community was roughed up. In December last year Tuhoe finally received a formal government apology for the troop's actions that day and for Rua's imprisonment.

So when Annie turned up at Rotorua with a companion, Ms Monfries, they were greeted by the Presbyterian educator, William Bird, who remarked they must truly be from the furthest end of Southland, because no woman living any closer than that would dream of entering the Urewera at that time.

The minutes of the Presbyterian Maori Mission recorded:- *'There were two places, Te Whaiti and Ruatahuna, where the children run like hares from the sight of a Pakeha. Where there are no schools and no other church has attempted work. Where the natives are so poor and unlearned in the cultivation of their land, that in winter they are on the verge of starvation. Mr Bird assured her that the government would put up a school whenever someone goes in and gathers the children together.'*

Ruatahuna was very isolated. It took the women several days to make the journey in from Rotorua. They had a car for the first day. However, the roads were too much for it. The radiator kept overheating. The engine refused to turn over with the crankshaft and they often had to push. In the end they gave up and walked to give the car a rest.

The next day they had a horse and buggy. But on the steep winding road the horse couldn't take them *and* their luggage, so again they had to walk a lot of that day as well. The local constable was about to send out a search party when they finally arrived well after midnight.

The women had been offered a 3 bedroom whare in which to start their new school. 2 of its rooms had dirt floors and the windows were just holes in the wall. By this stage Ms Monfries was ready to go back home. Even Sister Annie's optimism was severely challenged when the local rats visited them during the night. The 2 women lost no time finding alternative accommodation in the morning.

The arrival of 2 white women created a stir. Many in the community had never seen a white woman. One later recorded that he was quite young when he first saw Sister riding along. He got such a shock that he jumped the farm fence and tore off into the bush. He thought he had seen a ghost.

By the end of the year the Ruatahuna school had 72 pupils, children and adults. To cope with the demand the adults became a separate class and came in the evening. As well as her teaching work at Ruatahuna, Sister Annie was also taking services and sharing the gospel in other villages and bush camps.

John Laughton arrived at Ruatahuna a year later. He had come from a 2 year stint as the only minister of any denomination in the King Country. Within those 2 years he had got married and then been widowed. John had been posted by the Maori Mission

to set up a school at Maungapohatu in response to a request from some of the tribal elders there. Rua, on his release from prison put a hold on that plan. So while John Laughton waited in Ruatahuna for permission to go on to Maungapohatu, he and another missionary minister with the help of locals set to and built a schoolhouse out of palings for Sister Annie and her pupils.

Rua met John Laughton at Ruatahuna and soon afterward John Laughton was given permission to come to Maungapohatu. Sister Annie and John Laughton rode into Maungapohatu just over 2 years after the town had been invaded and Rua had been arrested for sedition. Feelings were still running high. It was the middle of winter and they were met by a fiercely defiant haka. When John started to move his personal belongings into the whare he had been given to live in, he found that there was already a family occupying it. The family showed no signs of packing up to leave and it took a week of delicate negotiations to get them to move on.

The school started up in July 1918 in Rua's old round dance hall with 11 pupils. There were no desks, and no blackboards. The lessons were written on the walls. John was still a beginner in Maori and the children had almost no English, so there was a lot of sign language.

John had no formal teacher training. Annie provided support from Ruatahuna, sending resources and advice and visiting when she could. On one occasion she made the 30+ km journey between the 2 settlements with a large blackboard destined for John's school, tied on the back of a pack horse. Initially resistant to the school Rua came to be very supportive, rounding up children from the surrounding area to come, and ensuring that repairs to the school building happened and furniture was built.



After the shaky beginning the 2 men developed a huge respect for one another. John's gentleness and humility and care for those he worked among, endeared him to a number of Maori leaders, including Sir Apirana Ngata. His Te Reo improved rapidly, perhaps partly due to his remarriage to Honiara Te Kauru in 1921. Honiara was a teacher at one of the other Urewera mission schools. Later

he wrote a Maori Language service book which is still in use, a Maori dictionary and he was the chief translator and supervisor for a revision of the Maori Bible. When he started, he was the only ordained minister in the Urewera. This meant he was called on to take funerals, weddings, baptisms and communion across the Tuhoe communities. He would travel by horseback around a 300 km circuit of Tuhoe settlements doing this, before coming back home to Maungapohatu.

In 1925 he was posted to Taupo to work with Maori there. He retained oversight of the Tuhoe mission stations so was able to keep up his Urewera connections. Before he left the people of Tamakaimoana hapu made him an honorary rangatira. He was a lifelong friend of Tuhoe, He served on various trusts and boards, including the Urewera National Park Board. He was instrumental in getting a road put in to Maungapohatu.

When he died in 1965 his tangi was huge. Here's a translation of what one of the elders from Maungapohatu spoke at it.

Although your skin is white, you are Maori. Your thoughts were Maori, your ways, were Maori, your language was Maori. There has never been a Pakeha like you. You embraced all people, the poor, the widowed, the orphaned. You embraced the tribes and sub-tribes in the land affairs, corporations in their family matters. It was Tamakaimoana who taught you your Maoriness.

While John's work took him other places, Annie spent the rest of her working life based at the little settlement of Ruatahuna.

She was at heart a teacher, and she would try to ensure that her brightest pupils had the chance to further their education, sometimes paying their fees herself. Here's what one of her pupils said about her.

As soon as we saw Sister coming up the road, we raced down to the wharepuni to ring the bell or we raced down to carry her bag.... She taught us many choruses and verses from the Bible and told many stories about Jesus. None of us will ever forget the songs and choruses Sister taught us. We looked forward to all these things.
(Mona Riini)

Like John Laughton she was called to turn her hand to all sorts of things. The nearest hospital was 2 days away in Rotorua, so she was often called on to deliver babies and look after the sick. She stayed in the Urewera nursing people at Ruatahuna and Murapara through the 1918 flu pandemic, and through outbreaks of whooping cough and typhoid. It was said that she was a skilled puller of teeth.

She would attend the Ringatu services on Saturdays and on the 12th of the month, and invite everyone to attend the Presbyterian services that she took on Sundays. She built close relationships with the spiritual leaders of the Urewera. She had a soft spot for Rua Kenana – a big hearted, kind intelligent man. They, in their turn, recognised her genuineness and kindness and love for God and their people.

While she never married, she had a village of children. She adopted a couple of them. Peka had contracted polio and was paralysed below the waist when he came to live with her. She arranged for him to have surgery and rehab at Rotorua. This enabled him to walk with the help of crutches. Her 2nd adopted son, Rata, tragically died in his teens of TB.

She was one of the first female Justices of the Peace in New Zealand. She was a diehard rugby fan and she was quite probably the first woman in the world to be president of a rugby club – the famous Ruatahuna Rugby Football Club. I have it from someone who used to live with her for a bit that she never worried too much about her appearance. That she would reach into her drawer for the first socks that she could find and put them on. It didn't bother her whether they matched or not. She could be crabby too when she was tired. She also had a great sense of fun.

In 1948 she retired to Ohope, but she still continued to look out for her adopted people, and they for her. They had gifted her over the years with some very precious Taonga, including a gourd that travelled on one of the canoes from Hawaiki. It is now housed in the Whakatane museum. One of the local Maori told me that that gourd is the most valuable artefact in the museum's collection, which says something of the regard in which Sister Annie was held. Her Tangi too was huge. She is buried at Ruatahuna.

Both John and Annie lived significant, fruitful lives. They are legends in the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. Paradoxically they did that by investing deeply in communities and places that, by most peoples' judgement, were very out of the way and insignificant. Like their master, Jesus, they made friends among people others were frightened of, or didn't understand, or couldn't be bothered with. They were outward looking, even in times of great stress. They were people of boundless energy, courage, grit and great kindness. They were distance runners, not sprinters. They understood the connection between love and commitment

These are uncertain times.

What is the challenge for you in this story?

What strength is God offering you through it?

I Am Calling

'The first language,' they say,

'is the language of the heart.'

I am calling –

Calling to you in your mother tongue,

Calling to you dwellers elsewhere,

Relocated,

Dis located,

Immersed in alien cultures, foreign tongues....

Calling in a language out of mind, deeply remembered –

With words that hint of story books,

Tree huts, scraped knees, ice blocks,

The road to the beach.

Bring your bumps and bruises,

Your heartache and your treasure

To the arms that can hold it all, along with you,

And you will be strong again in who you are.

C. Lind

People of Leith Valley, remember you have deep roots.

The material for this sermon is heavily reliant on 'Hihita and Hoani' a booklet written by Rev Wayne Te Kaawa for a 2008 exhibition at the Whakatane Museum. It is supplemented by conversations with the late Mavis Duncan, as well as articles on Annie Henry and John Laughton in the online Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand, by James Veitch and Jim Irwin respectively.

Clare Lind