



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief



Te Raukura is an important symbol to the tribes who affiliate to the Taranaki rohe. This symbol is captured in the form of a white feather, or a plume of white feathers. Te Raukura represents spiritual, physical, and communal harmony and unity. It is an acknowledgement of a higher spiritual power, which transcends itself upon earth. It is a symbol of faith, hope, and compassion for all of humankind and the environment that we live in.

There are various accounts of how the Raukura feather became such a significant symbol to the people of Taranaki. One such account refers to a gathering of people at Parihaka who witnessed an albatross landing on one of its courtyards, dropping a single feather before departing. This feather became the Raukura, and was honoured by Tohu Kakahi and Te Whiti-o-Rongomai, the prophetic leaders of Parihaka, and its community.

Through the distinct and honourable leadership of these two prophets, the Raukura feathers were a symbol of the passive resistance movement that Tohu Kakahi and Te Whiti-o-Rongomai orchestrated as a means of re-elevating the mana of the Māori people with a desire of being autonomous once again.

The Raukura is a symbol of remembrance for the deeds of the Māori ancestors who vehemently resisted the Crown via peaceful opposition. It is a symbol which continues to guide the Māori people today with wisdom and hope for a peaceful co-existence.

Keeping the Peace

Clay Nelson © 25 April 2021

This Sunday traditionally marks ANZAC Day on 25 April. For our international visitors to our livestream and Zoom service, ANZAC stands for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps that was formed to fight the Kaiser in World War I. The date was chosen as it marks the ANZACs' first engagement with the Ottoman Empire at Gallipoli in Turkey in 1915. It was a blood bath for both sides: 87,000 Ottoman Turks, 44,000 men from France and the British Empire, including 8500 Australians and 2779 New Zealanders died and are buried far from home. In addition 5212 Kiwis returned wounded. The ANZACs went off to war certain they would be home by Christmas, unaware of how witless and mad Winston Churchill's war plan was. While the Turkish forces lost many more lives in the battle, nothing was changed by the blood and gore. The Ottomans retained control of the Gallipoli peninsula. The whole episode brings to mind US presidential candidate George McGovern's observation: "I'm fed up to the ears with old men dreaming up wars for young men to die in."

Since 1916 both Australia and New Zealand have remembered the scars left on our collective psyches by Gallipoli on ANZAC Day. I continue to hope in vain that the ceremonies would not glorify such horrific violence by celebrating how noble were the 7991 casualties who gave lives and limbs for King and country. I would instead prefer it to be a day of swearing off violence of all kinds now and in the future.

While it is traditional to wear the red poppy on this weekend, to my mind the poppy has come to sentimentalise the horrific without requiring the sacrifice of becoming the change we seek. I have decided Te Raukura, a single white feather or a plume of three, a gift from an albatross left at a sacred site called Parihaka, would be more fitting.

Te Raukura represents spiritual, physical, and communal harmony and unity. It is an acknowledgement of a higher spiritual power, which transcends itself upon earth. It is a symbol of faith, hope, and compassion for all humankind and the environment that we live in. It is not just an anti-war symbol, it is a call to action. In particular, passive resistance to violence in all its many forms.

I am a student of the school of nonviolence practised by Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, and Nelson Mandela. What I did not know before coming to New Zealand was that, 15 years before Gandhi's first steps towards passive resistance in South Africa, two Māori leaders, Te Whiti o Rongomai and his brother-in-law Tohu Kākahi formed a village in the shadow of Mt Taranaki, a visual doppelgänger of Japan's Mt Fuji. The village is Parihaka. It was founded on Te Whiti's belief in passive resistance in response to the brutal land wars. His ideas eventually influenced Gandhi's successful strategy to overthrow British rule of India, King's successful civil rights movement against segregation and Mandela's dismantling of Apartheid.

Parihaka's 150 year saga is hard to summarise. The story begins with colonisation and European settlers', the Pākehā's, demands for land. The Crown had a simple, cunning plan. It was based on the idea that Māori who fought against the Crown for taking their land had thereby forfeited their property rights. Confiscating the land of such "rebel natives" fulfilled the dual purpose of punishing them and making their land available for settlement. In addition, the sale of the confiscated land to Pākehā settlers provided revenue to the Crown, essentially paying for the war that had allowed Pākehā to claim the land in the first place.

When Te Whiti and Tohu were forced from their homes, they founded Parihaka on the principle, "All fighting must cease. The canoe by which we are to be saved is forbearance." Te Whiti's messages of peace, nonviolence and equality drew Māori from far and wide, swelling the population to 2000. Up to 1000 more would come for monthly gatherings to hear Tohu and Te Whiti speak.

It became the largest Māori community in the country. For a decade, the settlement flourished, expanding its cultivations on the surrounding land. For a decade, the people weren't opposed.

Then, in 1878, the slumbering government awoke, prodded into action by settlers clamouring for land. Surveyors began laying out roads and sections, breaking a promise made six years earlier by the Crown.

For several months, Te Whiti allowed the survey to proceed, pending discussion of the situation with the government. But the government showed no inclination to discuss so, in 1879, Te Whiti and Tohu began to resist. They had the surveyors and their tools physically removed from their land. When the surveyors returned, they had their pegs uprooted and chopped into pieces. Then Te Whiti and Tohu played their trump card. They sent out Parihaka men to plough confiscated settler land.

It was a genius move on their part in choosing the settlers' tool to make a political protest against settlement. By using a contemporary farming implement, and not traditional Māori tools for planting, they asserted their right to participate in the modern economy on land taken in contravention of the government's own word.

They would also have been keenly aware of the religious symbolism. Māori were constantly being exhorted by missionaries to "turn their swords into ploughshares" — to abandon their "savage ways" and embrace peace. The Parihaka prophets — practitioners, rather than mere preachers, of peace — turned the missionaries' words back on them. "Peace is what you taught us. Why, then, do you come against us with the sword?" Each furrow condemned that hypocrisy.

Only men of mana, those of good standing and integrity, were sent out to plough. These acts of trespass were not trivial. They required both courage and restraint. As they ploughed, the men chanted a song containing the words: "I am cast upon a righteous path to be the fuel upon the fire." Te Whiti, they claimed, "will have the final word." The ploughmen, if opposed, were not to resist. When asked what should be done in the face of violence, Tohu answered: "Gather up the earth on which the blood is spilt and bring it to Parihaka."

The government got the message and responded swiftly. Ploughmen were arrested, fined exorbitant sums they had no hope of paying, deported, and imprisoned. Under the cloak of a national emergency, the government suspended the right to a trial and passed the first of a series of draconian Acts that became progressively more desperate and unjust as time went by. Native Minister John Sheehan advised Armed Constabulary officers not to worry about the legality of their arrests, telling them, "You take the men and the government will find the law."

Take them they did. More than 400 ploughmen were sent to prisons. Troops were sent to destroy the village and arrest Te Whiti and Tohu.

If people know anything of the Parihaka story, they know this part. The 2500-strong community sitting together on the marae through the night of November 4, 1881 not knowing when the troops would arrive. The 1500 Armed Constabulary soldiers and volunteers, weighed down with ammunition, encircling the village, expecting violence but were greeted instead by singing, skipping children and women who had baked 500 loaves of bread to feed their visitors. And yes, a dog which cocked its leg against the cannon and was later believed to have doused the gunpowder with its urine. (To this day, if a dog wanders into a meeting, it is not chased out, in deference to that defiant animal.)

We would know very little about this day, the day of plunder, were it not for a pair of journalists who defied a news blackout imposed by the Crown on pain of instant arrest.

One wrote: “The whole spectacle was saddening in the extreme; it was an industrious, law-abiding, moral and hospitable community, calmly awaiting the approach of the men sent to rob them of everything dear to them.”

These journalists and the papers they worked for were the scant few who dissented from the almost universal vilification of the prophets and what they stood for. One local editorial eleven years later offered the opinion that, all things considered, the Parihaka “difficulty” might prove to be one of the “greatest blessings” New Zealand ever experienced, “for without doubt it will be a war of extermination... justice demands these bloodthirsty fanatics should be returned to the dust... The time has come, in our minds, when New Zealand must strike for freedom, and this means the death-blow to the Māori race.”

While it would be naïve to think pockets of such violently racist attitudes don’t still exist, thanks to the people of Parihaka’s being the change Te Whiti and Tohu envisioned, a peaceful path forward has been forged for reconciliation and reparation. Te Whiti and Tohu’s way, as voiced by Gandhi, was, “The active part of Non-violence is Love. The law of Love requires equal consideration for all life... One who follows this law must not be angry even with the perpetrator of the greatest imaginable wrong... Although he must thus love the wrong doer, he must never submit to his wrong or his injustice, but must oppose it with all his might, must patiently and without resentment suffer all the hardships to which the wrong doer may subject him in punishment for his opposition.”

Parihaka’s practice of non-violence resulted in the Crown officially apologising on 9 June, 2017 for the atrocities it committed when it sacked the peaceful Taranaki settlement of Parihaka in 1881. People openly wept as the apology was read out by Treaty Negotiations Minister Chris Finlayson. He apologised for the wrongful arrests and imprisonment of Parihaka men and their leaders, Te Whiti-o-Rongomai and Tohu Kākahi. Mr Finlayson also apologised for the rape and molestation of the women and girls who were left behind when the men were imprisoned in the South Island. He said it was a shameful part of New Zealand’s history, which both Māori and Pākehā found hard talking about, for different reasons.

May the story of Parihaka become one with who we are. Let us hold up the feather with love and determined resolve.

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

Discuss different aspects of violence in our society that you could passively resist.