

Views from the Pews – Back to the Treaty

Some time ago, we wondered whether the Treaty of Waitangi could properly be labelled as a Christian document. We left the question hanging, partly out of reluctance to put words in the mouths of the Chiefs who signed – who now knows for sure what their faith was? What evidence was there of Gospel penetration at that level?

New evidence has however emerged. We all watched at least parts of the late King Tuheitia's Tangihanga, either live or on the evening news. We will have noted many features that were either overtly Christian – the Cross itself surmounts the Kiingitanga's Arms, the Arikinui's head was touched with an ancient Bible, and she was anointed with oil by attending clergy (and there were other echoes of another recent Coronation 12,000 miles away) – or which spanned two different cultures;

Food was used not only to relax and decompress after an emotional day on the Paepae but also to seal bonds of friendship between differing parties. Preparation of that food took on a sacred purpose.

There was a close and immediate juxtaposition between death, and the rising up of a new generation. There was a sacred river, used not only for transport but also to contain water with multiple layers of cultural and religious meaning. There was a sacred mountain. There was a great gathering of diverse people.

All of this would be familiar to scholars of the Old Testament, but more importantly it represents a coming together of ancient pre-European practice on the one hand, and of Biblical understanding on the other. In other words, the Missionaries' fingerprints were everywhere.

So it can safely be argued that the Kiingitanga is living evidence that the Gospel had penetrated the heart of the country by, or soon after, 1840. Moreover, it was a local response to the view that the Treaty had been broken and was about to be broken again. Maori were turning to the Bible for answers. The missionaries had taught them well.

If there is still doubt then we ought to re-read the Churches' response to the Treaty Principles Bill. The letter bears 400 signatures from across the spectrum. Church commentators repeatedly use terms like 'sacred', and 'covenant', when referring to the Treaty. These are specifically Biblical terms. Those 400 see the Treaty as a Christian document, and so can we. This is an opportunity to be heard.

Richard Swarbrick