

# Sermon for [St Michael's Anglican Church, Kelburn](#)

## Penal reform Sunday - 20<sup>th</sup> October 2013

[Isaiah 65:17-20; 23-25; 2 Timothy 1:8-12; Luke 17:11-19](#)

I have been asked to consider penal reform in the light of the story of Tarore & Ngakuku, and our texts for today.

### **My background**

In exploring this episode in our history, I've realised just how woefully poor my knowledge of New Zealand history is. I'm also aware of my real lack of understanding of tikanga Maori. So I'm stepping out where angels fear to tread. Please feel free to correct my understanding or pronunciation after the service or by email.

Nor am I an expert in our justice system, and I will not be giving any policy recommendations.<sup>1</sup> But I think I have learned something from Tarore & Ngakuku about the nature of the Gospel.

First I will tell you a little of my background, because it must shape my thinking about prison, criminality and justice to some extent.

I grew up in Masterton and lived there until I was 21. My father was a police officer, till I was about 12 years old. One of the big things that happened during dad's police years was that our house was burnt down.

One night when dad and I were shooting possums around lake Wairarapa three men who had a grudge against dad set fire to our house. My mum and three siblings were home. Everyone escaped unscathed.

One of the three perpetrators went to jail; the other two got off free, by various means. Insurance eventually rebuilt the house, and people from all over the country sent us replacement clothes and toys.

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<sup>1</sup> If you would like those, see the booklet from [Rethinking Crime and Punishment](#).

## The story <sup>2</sup>

Ngakuku was a chief of Ngati Haua, around Matamata. He and his daughter Tarore learned Christianity from the missionaries Alfred and Charlotte Brown, who had been invited to the area by the leader of Ngati Haua, Te Waharoa.

Alfred and Charlotte Brown set up a mission school near Te Waharoa's pa. Tarore was a bright student and the Browns gave her a Maori Gospel of Luke — Ko te Rongo Pai i tuhituhia e Ruka<sup>3</sup>. She memorised much of it, and wore it in a kete around her neck.

Late in 1836, CMS decided that it was getting too dangerous to keep the mission school there, so Ngakuku and a missionary took a party of 20 children over the Kaimai Ranges to Tauranga.

On the way, at Wairere Falls, they were met by a raiding party from Te Arawa. Everyone except Tarore escaped. She is killed & mutilated by Paora Te Uita.

Uita, though, takes the Gospel of Luke home to Rotorua, though he cannot read. At Tarore's funeral, her father Ngakuku refuses utu, calling instead for an end to war between the tribes:

*'There lies my child; she has been murdered as a payment for your bad conduct. But do not you rise up to obtain satisfaction for her. God will do that. Let this be the conclusion of the war with Rotorua. Let peace be now made. My heart is not sad for Tarore, but for you. You wished teachers to come to you; they came, and now you are driving them away. You are weeping for my daughter, but I am weeping for you—for myself—for all of us. Perhaps this murder is a sign of God's anger towards us for our sins. Turn to Him; or you will all perish.'*<sup>4</sup>

This happened 177 years ago today (20 Oct 1836).

Meanwhile, back in Rotorua, a literate slave from Otaki called Ripahau, read Tarore's Gospel of Luke and converted. Uita, the killer, is also converted. Uita returns to Matamata to ask forgiveness of Ngakuku. Ngakuku is reported to have said:

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from, among others, Peter McKenzie, *Stimulus* 6:2, May 1998, [www.petermckenzie.co.nz/docs/the\\_sequel\\_to\\_tarores\\_story.pdf](http://www.petermckenzie.co.nz/docs/the_sequel_to_tarores_story.pdf) and *Nga Kai-Rui i Te Ronogopai / Seven Early Maori Christians*, Rosemary Dewerse, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Picture of a similar Gospel: <http://www.georgegregory.org.nz/TheCollection/CollectionItem/id/97/title/ko-te-rongo-pai-i-tuhituhia-e-ruka-the-gospel-according-to-st-luke.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> A NEW ZEALANDER'S BIBLE, adapted from Christianity among the New Zealanders—by William Williams, published in 1869. [www.gospeltidings.org.uk/library/11/2/12.htm](http://www.gospeltidings.org.uk/library/11/2/12.htm)

*'If the great spirit who has made heaven and earth has forgiven me, then I must forgive the man who killed my child'.<sup>5</sup>*

Tarore's gospel continues to make its mark. When Ripahau's master dies, he travels home to Otaki. Ripahau befriends Chief Te Rauparaha's son Tamihana (Katu) and nephew Matene Te Whiwhi, and converts them. Ripahau teaches them to read using pages from Tarore's gospel.

Against Rauparaha's will, Tamihana and Matene travel to the South Island (apparently also with Tarore's book) to reconcile with the remnants of Ngai Tahu. Ngai Tahu had been decimated by Te Rauparaha, and Tamihana had as a child accompanied his father on attacks in the South Island.

Ngai Tahu chiefs ask Tamihana and Matene if Te Rauparaha was going to come to attack them. Tamihana replies, 'He indeed will not come; for I have indeed come hither to you to bring an end to warfare, and to bind firmly peace by virtue of the words of the Gospel of the Lord.'<sup>6</sup>

## **Connections with penal reform**

What does this all have to do with penal reform you may wonder? As I said, there are no obvious prescriptions or policy suggestions anywhere in there. But there are quite a few suggestive connections that I hope can inform the big-picture framework that we bring to the issues of crime and punishment.<sup>7</sup> On reflection, I noticed three main points of connection:

### **What is justice?**

The first thing that really struck me about this story is the way Ngakuku refuses utu for this daughter's death. As I understand it, utu is all about restoring balance in society, restoring lost mana. You have damaged my family, we will damage yours. But it's not a purely negative thing: you have given us a wonderful feast; we will host an even bigger feast for you.

When I think about losing a 12-year-old child; thinking of my own children I can barely imagine the grief. And for her to be deliberately killed — I'm sure I would be

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<sup>5</sup> Lethbridge, *Wounded Lion*, 1993

<sup>6</sup> [www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/1t75/te-rauparaha-tamihana](http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/1t75/te-rauparaha-tamihana)

<sup>7</sup> NT Wright, 'How Can The Bible Be Authoritative?', 1989.  
[ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_Bible\\_Authoritative.htm](http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm)

murderously angry, and if I didn't manage to kill her killer it would only be through cowardice. And in Ngakuku's context, in addition to those feelings would be the obligation to perform utu. Ngati Haua's mana would be reduced until it could redress the balance by harming Te Arawa in turn.

Within Ngakuku's cultural framework, he would have been totally within his rights — as I understand it, in fact, obliged, for the sake of the tribe if not for his own sake, to avenge. But instead, *'There lies my child; she has been murdered as a payment for your bad conduct. But do not you rise up to obtain satisfaction for her. God will do that.'*

It seems like he sees the rebalancing that has to happen as between God and the tribe, not between tribe and tribe. The gospel the missionaries brought has given him a larger vision of justice. He has gotten a wider framework of the right ordering of things, bigger than society's.

If I think about justice, I would normally associate it with 'fairness' — that core New Zealand value. People getting what they deserve. But the justice implied by Ngakuku's action is beyond fairness; it is a power that reaches out to reconcile what doesn't deserve to be reconciled. Ngakuku was acting in the spirit of Jesus' going to the cross, I think. *'While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us'*<sup>8</sup>. Utu is not the way we do things now in New Zealand, for the most part. But I think we do want justice to restore a kind of moral equilibrium. But Ngakuku leaves it up to God to 'obtain satisfaction', to make it right.

I talked with historian Samuel Carpenter this week to try and understand how Ngakuku forgoing utu could have been lauded by his contemporaries. Sam suggested that particularly with the introduction of muskets, Maori were war-weary, and utu-weary. Hongi Hika and others had been running riot around the country, enslaving and causing devastation everywhere. Maori were ready to escape the cycle of utu, and the missionaries gave them an honourable way out.

William Williams in his journal wrote that Maori *'seem to take it for granted that peace is the universal consequence of the introduction of missionaries'*<sup>9</sup>. Of course things got more complicated a few decades on. But perhaps Maori saw something of Christ in Christendom that Christendom itself had forgotten.

My point is that Christ's justice is not about clinging to rights, it's a restorative, reconciling force.

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 5:8.

<sup>9</sup> William Williams, *Journals V01.IV*, p.486, entry for 23 January 1838. Quoted in Heather Angela Ballara 'The origins of Ngati Kahungunu', PhD thesis.

## Status & vision

The second thing that struck me about the story is the way that status is relativised. Conversion to the missionaries' faith enabled Ngakuku to 'see past' the status and roles assigned by his culture. In particular the status of 'enemy' is relativised – both the personal enemy Paora Te Uita, and the tribal enemy, Te Arawa.

It is as if he sees the vertical relationship between humans and their creator so strongly that the horizontal relationships among people and between people groups no longer have ultimate reality. Hence he said: *'If the great spirit who has made heaven and earth has forgiven me, then I must forgive the man who killed my child'*.

In this I think Ngakuku is acting in the spirit of Jesus. In our Gospel reading Jesus meets and heals ten lepers. At least one of them, the grateful one, is a Samaritan. So he is doubly outcast — once for having a disease that rendered him unclean according to the Torah, and once for being a national enemy of the Jews. Here and in many other instances (think of Mary & Martha), Jesus ignores socially constructed roles and addresses people as just people.

I personally find this quite challenging. Intellectually I'm all for it, and want to see people as God sees them and treat them all alike; but in day-to-day life the reality is I'm often blinded by the status assigned to people by my culture — I try to impress high-status people and tend to avoid low-status people.

It's not just me though; as a society we write people off, whole categories of people. I'm helping publish a book on the health of prisoners at the moment. This is from Joy Bullen & George Kupa at Te Hikoitanga Reintegration Service at Orongomai Marae, Upper Hutt:

*'It's not unusual in the middle of winter, it's bitterly cold, it's pouring with rain, to see mums with pushchairs and little kids, trudging their way a good three kilometres from the closest public transport drop-off point, trudging all the way to the prison, sitting in the visitors' room which is goddamn inhumane, then trudging all the way back in the rain. By this stage, mum's a drowned rat, the children are wet and cold and not really well equipped to be out in those conditions. And we wonder why their health is poor? It's crazy — not just for our person in prison but for the whānau. The effect on the whānau is absolutely huge.'*

To me, the example of Ngakuku, and of Jesus, tells me that Jesus people need to be able to see with the eyes of faith; to see past status, society's roles, to even be able to see past what people have done to us, and engage with them as children of God.

## Power & belief

The third thing that struck me in the story, is the fact that Ngakuku is not just acting as a 'private citizen'. His conversion to Christianity affects his interpersonal relationships, of course, but it also dramatically changes how he acts in a public capacity. He was a chief, responsible for others. His words and deeds affect his tribe. He helped break the cycle of escalating utu.

Similarly, here in Kelburn, most of us have some degree of responsibility for others, some degree of power in the world.

To me the challenge is to, as Paul says, 'not be ashamed ... of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner'. To live out of our Gospel convictions, and not relegate God to a private little segment of our personal lives.

It's amazing to me the speed and thoroughness of Ngakuku's conversion. He made that speech at Tarore's funeral just six months after he decided to follow Christ. What gets in the way of the gospel transforming our lives so thoroughly?

Bishop +Justin has asked us all to take ownership of the issue of penal reform. I hope we can do that remembering the reconciling nature of Christ's justice; seeing beyond the status our society assigns to criminals; and speaking and acting in our areas of influence courageously and publicly.

In the name of the Father, the Son & the Holy Spirit, Amen.