

REFLECTION SAOTT ANNIVERSARY PITIONE FORESHORE

25TH FEBRUARY 2024 2pm

By Rev Dr Fei Taule'ale'ausumai

The Rev. John Macfarlane stepped off the ship the Bengal Merchant on the 10th of February 1840 and after a day of wandering about all day through mud and marsh and bush, he returned at last to the ship wet and weary, and altogether disappointed. The next day being the Sabbath Rev Mcfarlane conducted his first open air service here at Pitone Foreshore he preached from Psalm 137 verses 5 and 6. He didn't choose the first 4 verses but chose verses but the ones following verses 5 and 6. "If I should forget you o Jerusalem may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy." His choice of scripture may have been chosen to remind the settlers from whence they had come and that they should not forget the O Scotland.

I would have thought verse 1 would have been also appropriate "O how shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land." Boney M made that verse famous in their song by the rivers of Babylon.

The Ship the Bengal Merchant according to the terms of charter the vessel was to remain at anchor for four weeks whilst the inhabitants erected temporary habitations, but no such concession was allowed the passengers".

How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? I remember when I first arrived at St Andrew's College in Birmingham UK in 1994. I was sitting alone in my office about 5pm on a Saturday evening literally contemplating Psalm 137

“How shall I sing the Lord’s song in a strange land” and suddenly I could hear singing coming from the chapel next door to my office and the song was “E te Atua aroha mai”. OMG! I couldn’t believe it someone was singing a song from my homeland of Aotearoa in this strange land. I knew then and there that I had come to the right place, this was affirmation that I God was with me even though I was so far away from family.

Back in the time of sailing and before planes were invented, people immigrating from the United Kingdom to the antipodes or Africa or Asia, they had weeks to learn the languages of some of these countries, they had weeks to get over their homesickness. I can only assume by the time they arrived in their new country they were relieved to step onto dry land.

Bronwyn White sent me a message on Friday stating that her great-great-grandparents, James and Jean Gilbert and children came to New Zealand on the Bengal Merchant. Later, three of the Gilbert children married three Howell family siblings, who arrived on the Lord William Bentinck around the same time. She also was told that Fionn McKenzies forebears were also on the Bengal Merchant. So, as we stand here commemorating the arrival of settlers and the establishment of the first Presbyterian Church in Aotearoa NZ, some of the actual ancestors of SAOTT were settlers who travelled aboard the Bengal Merchant. Amazing.

The weather here when they arrived was miserable for quite some time, it rained constantly and according to John Macfarlane the 7th of March was the stormiest day experienced to date. Many of the cabin passengers had nowhere to lay their head and there was not much food, so they were very hungry.

Some were forced to rest under bushes, with umbrellas or whatever they could get above them.

Within a few months the pioneer settlers decided that this place Pitone, in the teeth of the wind and weather and for other obvious reasons, was not the proper place for settlement, and a move was made to the upper reaches of the harbour at Thorndon.

After some time, Rev Macfarlane conducted his first Maori wedding in te reo, there were about 40 Maori present in the village from amongst approximately 400 tangata whenua who lived in Wellington at the time. He asked them to make a confession of faith and afterwards repeated the Lord's Prayer and had enough knowledge of te reo to pray extempore. The tangata whenua were deeply impressed and declared that in future they would all be married in the same way. During that first year Mr Macfarlane baptised 29 children and married 19 couples.

Rev Macfarlanes ministry only last about 4 years and he returned to Scotland initially on furlough for 18 months but never returned to New Zealand. He took up a parish in Lochgilphead in Argyllshire on the 9th of September 1847. He married in 1852 and passed away in Glasgow on 8th March 1859.

St. Andrew's church Wellington was the first Presbyterian church established in the whole of Aotearoa New Zealand.

And today here in 2024, we continue to sing the Lord's song in a land we all call "home".

Thank you to Te Kakano o te Aroha, in particular, Rev. Te Tokoi for welcoming us this afternoon and sharing this special service of commemoration with us. May

our friendship as sister churches continue to thrive in the years ahead. Kia ora tatou. Faafetai.