



# Legacy

## Reflecting on ‘The Faith of Our Fathers’

*A talk prepared for the Botany, Auckland Elim Men’s Group series “The Faith of Our Fathers”. May 17, 2021.*

*In Evangelical Christian circles, particularly those dominated by Western perspectives of the faith, our personal heritage does not tend to feature significantly in our understanding and practice of faith in Jesus Christ. We can misinterpret the promise that we are ‘new creations’ in Christ, that the old is gone and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17), even when we experience evidence to the contrary. It helps to understand that that piece Scripture refers to our relationships with one another, not our relationship with ourselves. In this talk, Jay discusses the implications of our genetic heritage on our identity in Christ, our ‘best contributions’ to the Body of Christ, and the unique blessing we can be to the world around us.*

I am Jay Matenga. From my grandfather back, there is no pākehā heritage in our Māori lineage. We are related to Ngati Kahungunu ki Wairarapa, Ngati Porou and Ngai/Kai Tahu — basically all the tribes of the East Coast of the North Island and the entire South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. My father’s mother is of Prussian and English descent. My mother is of Welsh and English descent (with a little Aborigine mixed in apparently). In Māori terms, the process of tracking our heritage is called “whakapapa”. It is the blending of two distinct entities to create a unique third. For Māori this is as much a way of seeing the world as it is a way of thinking about our ancestry.

### Importance of Heritage

When I was asked to share from my personal experience on the topic of “the faith of our fathers”, I could not think of a better way to begin than to introduce the concept of whakapapa.

I can track my Māori lineage back 22 generations to the waka or canoe that brought us to Aotearoa New Zealand, the Takitimu, and to our ancestor Kahungunu, from whom my primary tribe derives its name, Ngati Kahungunu (the people of Kahungunu).

Genetically speaking, I was in Chief Kahungunu when he established his fame around the islands that we now know as Aotearoa New Zealand. I was in my ancestor Te Matenga Kainoke Tui when he received word in 1840 that the English wished to establish a treaty with iwi Māori, the Māori tribes. Just as, in the same mysterious way, Jesus was in his ancestor David when God established the Davidic line. Tribal peoples, for whom lineage is an important aspect of understanding oneself and one’s place of belonging in the world, comprehend the genealogies of Matthew and Luke in ways that escape most Western Christians.

My lineage and what I understand of the faith of my forefathers, shapes the person I am today—consciously (as far as I know it) and unconsciously. I believe certain deposits of grace (giftedness) are received, developed and

passed down through the generations, and that grace has some influence on who we become in Christ Jesus.

Similarly, I also believe that curses are passed down through generations that inhibit who we can become unless those curses are lifted through our relationship with Christ Jesus, whose obedience rescued us from the curse (Galatians 3:13).

There remains a hot debate in Western philosophy and psychology over the influence of nature verses nurture, over whether our personality, preferences and life choices are more influenced by our genetics or the environment of our upbringing. My own somewhat complex life experience has convinced me without a shadow of a doubt that genetics trumps environment.

### The Faith of my Father

I buried my father at the beginning of this month — May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021. Barrie James Tui Matenga was 86 years old and died of age-related illnesses. Person after person at his tangi (his funeral) spoke of his faith and testimony of Jesus Christ. They spoke of his love for people, his inclusivity, his passion for Jesus to be known in all the world and his sense of commitment to and confidence in his forefathers, my forefathers, as spiritual leaders.



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How my forefathers lived that out I cannot say. It's all lost in the mists of time, complicated by the loss of language, culture and oral history as a result of colonisation. But there is a strong narrative of holding spiritual power in my family that was redeemed once we came to faith in Jesus.

I learned this when I met my father for the first time in 2010. I was 42 years old. Through a conspiracy led by my grandmother and supported by my mother, my father never knew I was his son until we met all those years later—in an internet forum of all places. He was my maternal grandfather's boss and married to another woman at the time of my conception. He and my mother were engaged in a long-term affair until my mother broke off the relationship when she fell pregnant, claiming I was the by-product of a relationship she had with a man from her workplace. The conspiracy was apparently necessary because my father's wife's siblings were involved with the notorious Mongrel Mob gang and my grandmother did not want any kind of retribution falling on her household. This kind of working-class tension was not uncommon in Canons Creek, Porirua in the 1960s and 1970s.

## Unrest and Settlement

When my father and I first met in person, we shared stories and recollections, most of it agreed, some of it diverged. We shared our life stories with each other and toward the end of that visit he formally blessed me with the heritage of my forefathers, a proud heritage he assured me. Over the decade prior to his passing we often spoke of whakapapa, worked together on our family tree and I absorbed stories of ōku tūpuna (our ancestors).

When it comes to my family's involvement in the creation of what is now known as the nation of New Zealand, I only have fragments of information. I cannot say what my forebears thought of the treaty of Waitangi (1840). Evidence would suggest it was favourable, at least initially. Our chiefs signed it. I do know that we were known as an entrepreneurial people, traders, learners, and, by and large, peacemakers—not typically a warring people unless we had to be. Our people actually embraced the new settlers arriving in our territory shortly after the signing of the Treaty.

When some northern and Taranaki tribes raided our territory in the South Wairarapa in the 1820s, with newly acquired English muskets, we retreated north to relatives living on the Mahia Peninsula (near Gisborne) for safety. That's where we were when the Treaty of Waitangi was signed. Some stayed, but within a decade many began to return south—only to find the first

English settlers arriving in Wellington and exploring our region around the coast to the east, eager to use our land for sheep farming.

Initially, we leased large tracts of land to the English farmers, who created some of New Zealand's first and largest sheep stations. But by 1845, a mere 5 years after the treaty of Waitangi was signed, the settler authorities (representatives of the British Crown) started to intervene and force land sales. This accelerated such that in 1853, 1.5 million acres was force-sold for the equivalent of \$1 for 30 acres in just six months. An uneasy cohabitation between settlers and Māori has existed in the Wairarapa ever since, as it has elsewhere in Aotearoa New Zealand.

My relatives have taken up the cause of our forefathers and sought recompense for the injustices, but that is another story. Let us return to the issues of faith...

## The Faith of my Forefathers

The Reverend Māori Marsden, an Anglican indigenous theologian from the tribes north of Auckland was heard to have said something to the effect of, "before the missionaries came, we saw the foot of the mountain. When the missionaries brought Te Rongopai, the Good News, and Te Paipera Tapu, the Holy Bible, the cloud lifted off the mountain and we could see it in its fullness."

Reverend Marsden, therefore, viewed the coming of Jesus to Māori as a fulfilment of their understanding of spiritual and physical reality, not a replacement of it. Jesus suggests this phenomenon in our core text for this talk: Matthew 13:52. There Matthew records Jesus saying, "every person trained in religion who becomes a disciple in the Kingdom of Heaven is like a homeowner who brings from their storeroom new gems of truth as well as old." This quote is a slight paraphrase on my part since the context of the passage and Greek phrasing suggests that Jesus was not speaking of Jewish scribes or teachers of the Law, but of the disciples and their prior religious beliefs being enhanced by the new truth (gems) Jesus was bringing via parables.

It is now well established in the thinking of contextual theologians that there is no reading of Scripture, interpretation of our faith, or understanding of our relationship with Jesus and one another, that isn't influenced by our old thinking—by our pre-existing cultural lenses and biases. It is simply impossible to separate our faith in Christ from our inherited and lived experiences. As the saying goes, "where you stand will always determine what you see". Instead, our life in-Christ should redeem and enhance our perspectives and

our unique contributions to his Body—our gifts, that develop from, and are rooted in, our unique heritage.

I am not suggesting that the faith of my forefathers prior to the generation that received the gospel was salvific (able to make them right with God and integrate them into God as Jesus describes in John 17:20-26).

Sometimes my forefathers' spiritual practice was actually contrary to God's ways. A story is told of my great-grandfather Kaki Tui Matenga who had learned what the Bible would call 'witchcraft'. One day on a bus, a pretty young woman refused to relinquish her seat to the old man, so he called down a curse on her face, which immediately changed and remained contorted for the rest of her life. Thankfully, as the gospel took hold amongst Māori, the power of *mākutu* (sorcery) lost its grip on the people.

## A Faith Tested

The first Māori language New Testament was printed in 1837. By 1845, a mere 5 years after the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, 60% of Māori were recorded as attending church and many more had probably come to faith in Christ who weren't counted amongst congregations. This people movement happened mostly through the evangelistic witness of other Māori—usually young Māori who had learned to read and could understand and speak about the Scriptures.

By the time the entire Bible was available in 1868, Māori attendance in established churches was decimated by the influx of colonial settlers who claimed theological privilege but lived daily lives that, to Māori, were Biblically substandard and lacking in moral fortitude. It was during this period, from the 1860s to the 1880s, that our fledgling nation experienced its worst land wars and ethnic tension.

As soon as settlers began arriving here in large numbers, they swayed many missionaries away from their intercultural ministry with the Māori and put a huge amount of pressure on missionaries to meet the spiritual needs of the settlers. As a result, Māori in many regions felt abandoned or betrayed by the missionaries. Especially when Māori gifts of land for Iwi Māori schools, churches and other development services, were co-opted by denominational HQs in England (or France, for the Roman Catholics) for the benefit of colonial settlers.

In response to these experiences, many Māori broke away from European controlled denominations and formed their own indigenous expressions of the faith, guided by the few expatriate missionaries who remained supportive of Christ-following Māori. The expression of the faith that emerged during this season of testing often

centred on God being a deliverer and a God of justice. A God who rights wrongs. Māori strongly identified with and drew on Old Testament narrative more than New Testament teaching. However, when you're facing immense oppression, the Old Testament stories can be powerfully motivational.

As I implied earlier, faith and culture are indivisibly intertwined and clashes between cultural interpretations are inevitable, but that is not a bad thing because, as the Apostle James says, it is the testing of our faith, as we sit in the tensions of fellowship with one another, that produces maturity (James 1:2-3).

## Implications For Today

So what does this all mean for those of us living in Tāmaki Makaurau ki Owaioa (East Auckland) today? For me, the key word in faith and missions at the moment is "hybridity". This harkens back to the ecological implications of *whakapapa*—the blending of two entities to make a unique third. A father and a mother for instance, but *whakapapa* can be used as a scientific method for tracing the source of many things. After all, nothing is created *ex-nihilo* anymore—only God made something out of nothing (*ex-out of, nihilo-nothing*). Everything that is created is simply a reordering of what already exists. Even us—we are a re-ordering of a DNA code inherited by each of our parents and their ancestors.

So it is when the faith of one culture, the culture of the missionary, evangelist or gospel witness, and the culture of the recipient of that witness, meet and mingle. The missionary's testimony of Jesus introduces the recipient to the person of Jesus, and the recipient commences their own relationship with Jesus, empowered by their own encounter with the Holy Spirit and enhanced by their own reading of Scripture, guided by the teaching of those around them. In effect, new believers start writing their own gospel story, the story of their experience of the Lamb who shed his blood, which is the word of their testimony that overcomes the adversary, as the Apostle John tells us in Revelation 12:11.

My primary ministry is global missions focused. It is concerned with ministry beyond the boundaries of (directive) influence of a local church. Missions sits at the intersection of what is, a world without Christ, and what could be, a world transformed by Christ. When faith in Christ is born in a person and among a people for the first time, we see a blending of gospel DNA and culture—the story of God as told by the missionary, and the story of God as being lived by the new believers. These stories will resonate, they will agree on the basics, but, with reference to Matthew 13:52 again, new gems



will emerge from old heritage that are redeemed and presented as a grace or gift for the whole body of Christ. Throughout the entire history of global Christianity, the Church has grown like this in indigenous ways—hybrid expressions of the gospel if you will.

We need all manner of expressions of faith in-Christ to be in dialogue with one another. We have so much to learn from one another. And as we gather together in cultural diversity we are quite literally being transformed by the renewing of our minds as we submit to one another and accept each other's testimony of Christ at work in their lives. This is the point Paul makes in Romans chapter 12. When we gather together in submission to God from diverse ethnic, cultural, generational and socio-economic backgrounds it is the acceptable act of worship that Paul refers to in Romans 12:1. Loving one another by learning from each other helps us not to conform to the pattern of this world. Because the pattern of this world is all about retreating into echo chambers and relating only to people who look, think and live like us. No, the Holy Spirit's transformative power is released in greater measure as we dwell in the tensions of difference—while keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, in-Christ (Ephesians 4:3). Persevering in these testings and trials of difference within the fellowship matures us according to James 1:2-4.

## A Legacy Continuing

My genetic hybridity—both European and Māori—influences the shape of my faith experience and understanding of God. To some degree, I see both the individualist/industrial plusses and minuses and the collectivist/indigenous plusses and minuses. You will bring your distinctive cultural experiences into your understanding of God, AND... your cross-cultural experiences, if you are a migrant. When Paul says in Romans 12:1 'submit your bodies to God as living sacrifices' he means for us to follow the attitude of Christ who modelled such submission, which Paul further referenced in Philippians 2:6. There, he notes that Jesus did not consider his privileges as God as something to be grasped, wielded or imposed on others, but he gave them up and became a servant, submitting to others. Similarly, we should not impose our perspective of the faith on others, but instead share it with each other and remain open to learning from one another. The Māori experience and understanding of God through faith in Christ is no less legitimate than the European or US American theologians'. On a global scale we need to learn from one another and allow each other to express our faith in ways authentic to our

backgrounds, while remaining sensitive to the other people's convictions about faith in Christ.

In addition to my global-focused responsibilities, I also try to stay engaged in local theological conversations, especially as they relate to an authentically Māori expression of faith in Christ. A large group of Māori believers are revisiting the faith of our forefathers that was essentially oppressed by European settler churchmen and denominationally-bound theologies. This cohort of younger Māori Christ-followers are rediscovering those truth-gems in our culture that had almost been lost. Now the legacy can continue.

Again, with reference to Matthew 13:52, in the minds of Māori, the United Nations, and according to the Treaty of Waitangi, Māori retain the rights as the "homeowner" of these motu, these islands we call Aotearoa New Zealand. This adds further weight to the conviction that some Charismatic Christian leaders have prophetically sensed in the recent past that when Māori followers of Christ are freed and encouraged to bring out these old taonga (treasures) of truth from the storehouse, to find their fulfilment alongside the new treasures we have in Christ, we will see something of a revival in this nation. The ancient Māori perspectives will help express the truths of Christ in dynamic new ways, with the potential to transform the body of Christ—not only in our nation but nations all around the world.

As leader of the Global Witness department for the World Evangelical Alliance, which represents some 640 million evangelicals around the world, I am in a privileged position to pass on treasures I'm discovering as a Māori Christ-follower. I am also responsible for creating space for people from all other nations to contribute gems from their cultural perspectives as well.

Back in the 1970s, when my father came to faith and was appointed to a pastoral leadership role in his church, he received a prophecy, a portion of which stated, "your seed would be as the seed of Abraham, a blessing to the nations". My siblings grew up wanting nothing to do with religion so my dad had no idea how it would ever be fulfilled. I obviously knew nothing of this prophecy until we met almost 40 years later. By that time the Lord had led me on my own path out of an agnostic and abusive homelife into His glorious grace, quite separate from my father's influence. When he read me that prophecy, I was already part of the international leadership of a global missions agency and participating in the World Evangelical Alliance's Mission Commission, the focus of which is to "strengthen participation in God's mission". In other words, I was following a call on my life to be a blessing to the nations.

No one can convince me that genetics and heritage has little to do with the call of God on a person's life.

## Passing On The Blessing

So, in conclusion, I believe our ancestral heritage has a huge amount of influence on our giftedness and call as followers of Jesus Christ. Even if those gifts were not used for God's glory but for personal or even evil gain, they can be redeemed in Christ and transformed as powerful contributions to the growth of God's Kingdom. As I got to know my father later in life, I began to better understand myself. We were cut from very similar cloth. He had a different measure of some gifts than I, and I than him, but we could recognise a common sense of spiritual authority that has seen us both involved in spiritual leadership. What my great grandfather used in unholy ways, Christ has redeemed for His purposes.

You may not know your ancestral heritage at all. It may have been lost in migration or parental ignorance. You may have been adopted. It need not hinder you from thinking about the grace (giftedness) you recognise in yourself and considering it as a legacy that has been handed down to you. Give thanks to God for these good things that you have inherited. Even if you cannot quite put your finger on what they may be, ask the Holy Spirit to redeem that which may have been meant for selfish gain to become tools used for God. Celebrate the uniqueness of who God created you to be out of the line of ancestors that went before you—you really are unique. And, if you're a parent, consider how you can identify and strengthen the gifts passed on to your children and pray a blessing over your children's children and their children. What you do today is merely a link in a chain of generations, should Christ tarry.

Here are some questions you might like ponder as you seek God about your best contribution to Christ's kingdom:

- What do you sense are the gifts of God on your life?
- How might your own heritage have influenced those gifts in unique ways as a legacy received?
- How are you using those gifts as a legacy you have to pass on?
- In Romans 12 Paul says, "Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us... We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other." How are you being transformed by the renewing of your mind through the gifts that others not like you have to bring into the mix?

'Arohanui haere ra ki a koutou' — much love to you as you go into all the world to be a blessing with the gifts passed on to you by generations for generations.