

As most of you will know, today 5 November is Guy Fawkes' Day, the anniversary of that day in 1605 when a plot to blow up the House of Lords in England with 36 barrels of gunpowder was foiled. Guy Fawkes' Day is nowhere near as big as it was when I was a child, which is perhaps not surprising given the best fireworks were banned many years ago. You may have heard of Mighty Cannons, Thunderbolts, and Double Happys, but unless you are of a certain age, you will not know how just much fun they were. Or what happened when you set them off in people's letterboxes. Not that I ever did anything like that, of course. And I somehow don't think you will be getting to play with fireworks of any description in here, not even the really tame ones which are all you can get today.

But today is not only Guy Fawkes' Day. It is also the anniversary of something much closer to home, the invasion and sacking of the Taranaki village of Parihaka in 1881. Not everybody knows the story of Parihaka, but it is better known than it used to be; the first time I ever heard of what happened at Parihaka was when its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary was observed in 1981.

Te Whiti-o-Rongomai III and Tohu Kahi were just two of a number of Mōri who led indigenous spiritual movements during the latter half of the 19th Century. They had seen the devastation the Taranaki Wars had brought to their people, and they promoted a peaceful alternative to war. They attracted a strong following amongst Mōri who had been disillusioned by loss of land and *mana*. Many flocked to their base at Parihaka. It reputedly became the largest Mōri community in the country.

Te Whiti was a powerful orator. His influence extended far beyond Taranaki. He vocalised Mōri grief over loss of land using a mixture Mōri spiritual idiom and Christian rhetoric infused with knowledge of the Pakeha world. His oratory was steeped in Biblical imagery, much of it apocalyptic in nature, which was not surprising given his favourite book of the Bible was said to be Revelation.

However, as much as Te Whiti and Tohu wanted peace, their resistance to land confiscation set them on a collision course with a colonial government backed by settlers who were hungry for land. Te Whiti was especially aggrieved by confiscated land being left

unoccupied by settlers and by the government's failure to live up to its promise to set aside reserves for Māori.

When the government started to survey 16,000 acres of confiscated land on the Waimate Plain in 1879, without having allocated reserves for Māori, followers of Te Whiti and Tohu embarked on a campaign of peaceful resistance. They hampered the work of surveyors and ploughed confiscated lands that had been allocated to settlers, whom they were - not surprisingly - outraged. It would only be a matter of time before the government acted.

On 5 November 1881, one hundred and thirty-six years ago today, nearly 1,000 settler volunteers joined 644 troops, and marched into Parihaka to be greeted not by violence but by singing children offering hospitality. Te Whiti, Tohu and other key leaders were arrested for sedition and ultimately exiled without trial to the South Island for two years and the community infrastructure was destroyed.

Jesus says we should not only love our neighbours, but also those we would consider to be our enemies. But, like many of Jesus' commands, that can often be easier said than done. Especially in a place like a prison where it is usually counter intuitive to act anything but staunch. It also would have been counter intuitive for Te Whiti and Tohu to passively greet an invading war party. But that is exactly what they did. And their actions and those of their community showed tremendous courage in the face of grave danger.

Te Whiti and Tohu showed themselves to be followers of the teachings of Jesus, and earned themselves a place in history books. Remember how fearlessly Jesus met his fate? When he had just been arrested, one of his followers had cut off the ear of the high priest's slave, and Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?"<sup>1</sup> Jesus set an example that Te Whiti and Tohu followed.

So what became of them? They returned to Parihaka in 1883, with their *mana* seemingly undiminished. While civil disobedience resumed, and ploughing of land continued up until 1897, the glory days of Parihaka were well and truly over. Te Whiti and Tohu both died in 1907, only two weeks apart.

But they left us a great legacy. Their non-violent resistance against oppression was a practical demonstration of Jesus' commandments to love God and love our neighbours. They long preceded Mohandas Ghandi, Martin Luther King Junior, and Nelson Mandela, and there is evidence that Gandhi was inspired by the Christian-led resistance of Parihaka. They left us an inspired vision of non-violent resistance action and a belief in the peaceful and respectful co-existence between races. And they played their part in helping bring about the realisation of God's reign of justice and peace.

Today, Parihaka is a small settlement, but it continues to be the meeting place of the peoples of Te Whiti and Tohu. The community maintains its traditions and teachings and it strives to live in harmony with the land and humanity. Since 2006, it has hosted the annual Parihaka International Peace Festival.

We can look to Te Whiti and Tohu as role models when it comes to putting some of the more difficult teachings of Jesus the Christ into practice. I believe we can mark a start by applying these principles in our own lives. And by retelling the story of Parihaka every year on 5 November.

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<http://theword.tk>

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 26:23