

Matariki – Thanksgiving for creation

Sermon message by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, June 26, 2022, All Saints' Belmont and St Alban's Pauatahanui

Keynote Bible Readings: Job 38.1 – 18, 31, Matthew 2.1 – 11a

'Twinkle twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are.' And so have cultures down through the ages, gazed at the stars, and seeing patterns, timing, meaning and guidance.

This morning then I invite us to consider *four cultures*, each with similarity of theme. The first logically is Māori culture and its cause for celebration we are being introduced nationally for a significant highlighting of Māori culture. Traditionally it has been of sharing of stories, of hospitality, acknowledging those who have passed on and greeting the new cycle of life.

There were links too with creation, hence the theme of this service, Thanksgiving for creation. It is regarded as a time when mother earth rests and rekindles her energies. It's the time when the harvesting of kumara had finished, and shoals of migrating fish were bountiful. Land was prepared for planting. In this age Matariki signals new beginnings, recognising in the rising of the Pleiades star cluster and Orion a new year, a new life, a time to reflect on the year passed and setting new goals for the year ahead.

(It times well in our parish for a new ministry beginning soon).

Māori were supreme navigators, and a significant aspect was the reading of the stars for navigation. They also were aware of seabirds and wave patterns indicating proximity to land. So they happened on Aotearoa, land of the long white cloud. There was more – and it's interesting they voyaged on the large wakas to islands of the Southern Ocean south of New Zealand. Not many know that Māori lived on Enderby and Auckland Islands, as middens have been found from their cooking. They also were largely responsible for the survival for a time of a British settlement being established in the 1850's at Hardwicke, on the north of Auckland Island. The would-be settlers toughed it out in appalling climate conditions – cloud, rain and cold. Poor soil and far from anywhere. But what was more remarkable much to their surprise on arriving they met a group of Māori from Chatham Island living there and who shared vegetables with them. What is even less known is that it is likely a waka got as far south toward Antarctica when they recorded in their oral history seeing great white cliffs - icebergs. So in all this we can with Māori celebrate Matariki.

2) Second, consider Hebrew *history and culture*. Where it starts – 'In the beginning God.....' Creator of the universe. And God saw all he had made and indeed it was very good.' Hebrew scripture records other encounters with the God of creation. For example, a passage from the Book of Job. A conversation is how it is expressed, as Job questions his dilemma: God responds: 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth...?' They must have been aware of the stars, as there's mention in the dialogue – 'who can bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion? (v18). (That was from an awareness of patterns in the stars). Psalms too refer to creation: 'When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established' (Ps 8). The early church also was aware God creator as they prayed 'Sovereign Lord who made the heaven and the earth....'

And St Paul's proclaiming, 'The God who made this world and everything in it, who is Lord of heaven and earth...' (Acts 17.24)

3) Somewhat surprisingly there is reference to *Arabic culture* in Scripture. Who would have thought, an excerpt in the gospel, 'Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi came from the east, 'where is the child who was to be born king of the Jews, for we have observed his star in the east..... They followed the star they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.....' Led by a star. Magi were astrologers and obviously followed star patterns and that being recorded in the Scriptures.

4) The fourth is *European culture*. It's part of who we are – remember as a child singing 'Twinkle twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are...' I happened to look up and see when it entered our culture, and Google told me it was penned by one Jane Taylor in England in 1806. Then later was set to a piece of music written by no less than Mozart. (We can sing it) Ah vous dirai-je, maman - in 1780's. Shall I tell you mother?

Human inquiry into the stars caused much tension in the Middle Ages. Remember learning about Galileo and the church at odds. The universe continues to be the subject of human enquiry. So much so that it is not only astronomy and now it has spawned into a science in its own right – *cosmology* – the science of the origin and development of the universe. Thus I see a connection with the scripture as Mark's Gospel records Jesus' commission to the disciples 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to all creation' – (translating the Greek *kosmos*.)

I well remember an aha experience– when travelling in Chile. You may be aware that the Andes Range is a favourite site for viewing outer space, with a number of international observatories built high up above atmospheric pollution. When staying at the Atacama Desert there was opportunity to visit a thermal area 4,000 meters up. Only to see it at its best one had to be ready at 4am for the van to pick us up. I well remember looking up and seeing the myriads of stars (being mindful of the song, 'hands that flung stars into space.') So on arriving, with the temperature –minus 15 Celsius, we were treated with the view. [Photos]. In the dark, the stars, the numbers are mind-boggling.

Let me quote from the writing of an astronomer. 'Our galaxy in space, the Milky Way, has around 300 billion stars, many with planets orbiting them. There are about 100 billion galaxies, so a lot of planets for life to potentially exist on. But using our fastest space tech, it would take around 76,000 years to get to the nearest solar system, Proxima Centauri. The universe is mind-bogglingly big.' (Maggie Aderin-Pocock)

So then we do well to be aware of dark sky reserves such as Aoraki Mackenzie with Mt John near Lake Tekapo. There could well be life out there, but intelligent life is a much rarer possibility, and we are still searching. Such is our culture and nature.

So then in concluding, I left off sharing the theme of the sermon – '*God of the universe*'. Truly we can give thanks for creation, for life and living on Planet Earth. How much we need to nurture and protect it, as *kaitiaki*, guardians. As humanity we have a spirit of fascination, and of inquiry and that promises for the future. I conclude with a mantra that was given for those voyaging to the islands of the Southern Ocean: 'One does not discover new lands without consenting to leave sight of the shore.'