

Colenso Service
Waiapu Cathedral
Nov 13, 2011 6pm
Bishop John Bluck

Genesis 1:1-13
2 Cor 4:5-15
Luke 8: 4-8

With the greatest respect to any of his relatives present tonight, I'm not sure, even if I had the chance, that I would enjoy actually meeting William Colenso.

There are few figures in our New Zealand history that have been recorded in such unflattering terms as William.

Normally, the historians tread carefully with personality profiles, giving the benefit of the doubt. Not so with our man. The usually constrained NZ Dictionary of Biography calls him bitter, vindictive, judgemental, intolerant, haughty, overbearing and humourless.

And that's just for starters.

I'm fascinated with this man and his enormous achievement. But I'm not sure I'd like to meet Mr Colenso.

But I did, in a manner of speaking, one wet Sunday morning in Woodville, back in the days when I was your bishop, a lifetime ago, and in one retrospective sense his bishop, I suppose. Thank God I never had to be Mr Colenso's bishop face to face.

There we were standing in the rain outside the church, blessing a stone cairn that had been erected on the lawn to honour William's ministry in the parish of Woodville. After 40 years of exile from the church he loved, Bishop Leonard Williams had given him a job, after Bishop Stuart before him had restored a licence to William. Brave men, both of them, to reinstate a firebrand as incendiary as William.

I blessed the stone and said a few words about how sad it was that none of William's family were present. His wife Elizabeth and son Ridley Latimer left the diocese after the scandal of William's affair with the housekeeper Ripeka, and never returned. And Wiremu, his child with Ripeka, also disappeared from the record, or so I said innocently, but rather stupidly as it turned out.

Because out of the sodden congregation, stepped Mike Pehi, a funeral director from Ashhurst. Well, as a matter of fact, he told us, I'm William Colenso's great great grandson.

Suddenly Colenso the man was right there with us. We'd spent a year of pilgrimage bumping into him, and walking through his story at every stage, including wading in his footsteps up the river bed of the Ngahuroro from where he made his epic journeys over the Ruahine ranges.

We'd given stones from that river bed to confirmation and baptismal candidates, Colenso the missionary, the evangelist, the man of faith was reclaiming a place to stand in Waiapu, but on that wet Woodville morning, through his grandson's living, breathing intervention, William Colenso was uncomfortably present in our midst. I shouldn't have been surprised. The whole lesson of the Waiapu Pilgrimage Year was that the stories that made us who we are as a diocese don't go away. They live on, even when we lose track of them. When we went to Rangitukia at the start of the year, the elders said well it's about time you came back and reconnected with your history. And when we went to Maungapohatu, and stood outside Rua Kenana's house, the elders said the mountain is smiling because you've come back. Time and again the

stories came alive when we rediscovered and retold them, and the people of those stories, our forebears in the faith, surrounded us on every side, a cloud of witnesses watching as we stood in bush clearings and marae and churches, some of them unlit and overgrown and neglected. And in one place, on the edge of a village that once held 2000 people where William Williams regularly held services, and taught and baptised and confirmed, we stood on the edge of the road, looking out at an empty hillside, but knowing we were not alone, as surely as we knew on that Woodville morning that William was still around.

Not everyone would agree of course, that he is worth remembering. The compilers of For All The Saints, our official Anglican dictionary of saints to honour each day of the church's year, don't have a listing for Colenso. There is Clement of Alexandria, just before the space he should fill, and Columba of Iona, just after, but no word of William.

Is that because of his extra marital infidelity, or his bad manners. What kept him exiled for 40 years, and saw him slide from being the church's most zealous and committed missionary, to the cleric that bishops loved to avoid?

We will never know, but luckily you don't have to be a nice guy to join the communion of saints. The cloud of witnesses is full of people who you wouldn't want to marry, or even have dinner with, but who lived out the faith of Jesus Christ with such intensity, such passion, such courage, such bloody minded endurance that their legacy endures forever.

William Colenso is one of those, especially the bloody minded endurance part. He walked the length and breadth of the North Island, on journeys that took up to five months at a time, enduring impossible hardships, achieving feats of exploration, botanical discovery, and always gospel preaching and teaching that have never been equalled since. One Colenso travelling on foot would make ten contemporary clergy in four wheel drives redundant overnight.

But he made it hard for the church to appreciate him. Not only because of his improper and unbecoming conduct, and his often offensive manner.

William was an unlovely bundle of contradiction – the volatile man who was also the careful master printer, the dogmatic exaggerator who was also the meticulous scientific researcher and recorder, the judgemental puritan who was also the passionate lover, the harsh critic of Maori who was also their champion for justice, the isolated recluse who wrote 700 or 800 letters a year to an international circle of admirers.

Out of the muddle of all that, no wonder it took the diocese 40 years to forgive him, and another 100 years to honour him.

As we should, however belatedly.

Because Colenso was in fact forging a legacy of huge importance for this church and this nation. He was working out a theology, a way of understanding how God works in the world, that he never got around to articulating. He simply lived it, and left it for us to make sense of it and value it. The scientific community especially those with botanic interests has done that ahead of the church, the academic community of historic, literary, typographic, political and geographic interests is getting on board. Hopefully the church community, especially now that we respect Maori and Pakeha tikanga to each make their own valuations, is hopefully catching up on Colenso's legacy.

And just what is this theology that Colenso quarried through his lifetime? I haven't seen it written down anywhere yet, certainly not in his own religious writing which is overloaded with sin and guilt, damnation and personal redemption language.

Ironically, he sounded otherworldly in his preaching, but his preoccupation was with the things of this world in their smallest and most precise detail. He stuffed botanical specimens down his shirt front so he catalogue them for the world, he detailed the intricacies of Maori vocabulary and grammar, he audited the accounts of province and nation and argued over the last penny, he fought the runholders and speculators over the legal details of their land purchases from Maori. In all these crusades he was driven by a passion for justice and truth and transparency, and a reverence for creation in all its awesome complexity and beauty.

Listen to these words from Bagnall's biography of Colenso, describing the last days of his life: "So in the evening (of his life) the memories became shadows.. with the brown sheen of kakas shaking the snow from the kowhai as they swung under the yellow flowers, the shingle tugging surf grating against the boom of its fall at Palliser (Bay).. the sweep of the hard fans of piupiu against his legs in the open beech (forest), the earthy smell of a red trodden tarn edge on a hot summer afternoon; the call of the sea mocking him home.."

This is a man who knew that God had been crafting the creation from the first morning and seeing that it was good. A man who saw and treasured its beauty, loved and savoured its every detail, every nuance, and spent his life trying to record and measure and understand it and make it work as God intended.

He did that as the most unlikely of God's servants. Afflicted, perplexed, outcast and persecuted (however deserved you might think that exile might have been), struck down, always dying so that the life of Jesus might be made more visible in his mortal flesh. This most miserable and broken of men is the one whose memory endures long after so many good and decent people whose lives of restraint and caution are long forgotten. It's Colenso the outrageous, the ambitious, the man of impossible expectations that we remember.

Paul tells us that God puts his treasures in clay jars, fragile, often dropped, easily broken. No one more so than William Colenso.

And no one who better demonstrates the gospel invitation, when all is lost and broken, when you have exhausted your worthiness and usefulness, even your self respect, to start all over again.

The story of our church is full of disappointment and failures, people who let us down, plans that come to nothing, relationships that turned sour and curdled.

But it is equally full of stories of people who dig themselves out of that despair and make a new start and claim a new future because they believe God will empower us to do that, if we dare to ask.

Colenso asked, and turned the ruin of a life into a whole series of great achievements. That's the best part of the legacy he leaves us.

He didn't plan it that way. He'd be surprised to see us embracing him tonight. He didn't, couldn't see the way God continued to use his life and still continues to do so. Colenso would be the last to know that the seed he sowed finally fell on good ground and bore fruit. He'd be amazed to think we are part of his harvest as the people of God called Waiapu.

Colenso's harvest. God's harvest. 100 fold.