

Evensong for Elizabeth Colenso
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Waiapu Cathedral
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Isaiah 33:20-22
Ephesians 2:19-23

Elizabeth Colenso wrote in a letter to Charlotte Brown in 1843 “We have no abiding city...we are but strangers and pilgrims on earth.”

Even as a young newly married woman she had a sense of not belonging to anyone or anywhere, but of being a pilgrim, a traveler with a mission, who belonged to God.

Elizabeth was born in Aotearoa in Kerikeri in 1821. She grew up speaking te reo Maori and when she came to Hawke’s Bay, the first Pakeha woman to do so, she was fluent in te reo. To find European support for the birth of her second child she travelled for 2 weeks, mostly on foot to Gisborne. Her marriage was a partnership of work and mission, not of love. And yet this sense of being alone does not daunt her spirit and she devotes her life to the mission of the church and the welfare of the Maori she taught.

In HB she lived and worked in very tough conditions; William described it:

Upon arrival there, we found a native built raupo whare, without floor, doors or windows, with a square hole cut in the roof for a chimney, and the earthen floor covered with mud from a recent flood. As a gale was coming on, our belongings were piled up under the verandah, and as it was late, we slept among the packages.¹

Housekeeping in these conditions was arduous but Elizabeth was resourceful and not only managed the house but also started schools. “The ground round the Mission Station being so waterlogged was extremely cold in the winter, so that water froze in the bedroom and milk in the pantry. Elizabeth carried on with the daily tasks at home and at school.”² The school and chapel were built across the river but Elizabeth remained undaunted and “as soon as lessons were begun, Elizabeth had to paddle across every day to teach her classes.”

These conditions may well have prepared her for the next challenge of her life; becoming estranged from her husband as a result of his affair. She left William and went to Auckland where she began a new life, an independent life, unheard of for a woman in 1853. She never saw William again.

She then continued in her chosen career: teacher, linguist, translator, editor. In her time in England she contributed significantly to the Maori translation of the Bible. On return to NZ she took up a new stage of her life as a missionary in Norfolk Island, learning new languages and continuing to teach and translate.

She was a pilgrim, a traveler, but not homeless. Her home and her heart were with her God. Isaiah the prophet talks of Jerusalem as the place where people will find a home,

¹ EC *Recollections* quoted in Cathy Ross’ thesis p158 later published as Women with a Mission

² Swabey, “A biography,” 15. quoted in Cathy Ross’ thesis p159

where God will reign. Paul echoes and then extends this and says people are built together as a home for God. God's world is built person by person, joining together to create a place of peace. Elizabeth Colenso understood this completely. She had to build her own world: born into a new world, of Maori and a few Europeans; she had to feed and clothe her family; teach Maori eager for learning; live in difficult conditions; and while she was deeply hurt by William's betrayal, she never turned aside from her prime calling; to be a teacher of the gospel.

How many of us when faced with such adversity could carry on any work that we are currently called to? How many of us would be that passionate about what we do that we would continue? Not just work in the church, but whatever we do: teachers, artists, shopkeepers, business owners, community workers, writers. Judging by what I saw of the people at the conference this week; I think a lot of you would carry on. You have a passion for your area of work or research or interest. We have seen in Christchurch after the earthquake how people set up their businesses in garages or lounges; how people set up roadside cafes and markets; they carried on, for survival in part but as a result of their belief in what they do also. That is the kind of spirit Elizabeth Colenso has left us.

Even if we do not have Elizabeth's amazing fortitude we can have her sense of making a difference and being part of building God's world. We can offer our own skills and gifts to God and see them as part of the bigger picture, linked together, making a difference. We too can build the household of God Paul speaks of. Building that household is not an individual task, it is a task and calling of those who work in community. This Cathedral and the church it serves is here because of the passion of Elizabeth Colenso, of William Colenso, Renata Kawepo, Henare Tomoana, and Raniera Wiki. They were called to preach the gospel in these parts, to build community. We serve in their place, handed down to us. They would recognise tonight's service of evensong; the same words said and sung for centuries; they might not recognise much else about our world so radically different from theirs'.

Or would they – in locals they would recognise and acknowledge your passion for our city and region; in visitors they would recognise that you have come to this conference seeking to learn and be challenged by what you learn. And whether we are people of faith or not they would see God in us, because they knew every person to be a child of God. And Elizabeth and her contemporaries encourage us from history to walk our pilgrim walk and serve our community in our time.