5th November 2024

Pacifism

"The chain reaction of evil – hate begetting hate,
wars producing more wars – must be broken,
or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation."
Martin Luther King Jr., *Where do we go from here: Chaos or Community?*

On November 5th this year, I'm *not* going to touch on the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 as I've done before. For I've been reflecting on a subject that's the anthesis of today's normal shenanigans.

From the mid-1860s, the Māori settlement of Parihaka had attracted dispossessed and disillusioned Māori from around the country. In May 1879, in the context of New Zealand's 19th century Land Confiscations, the colonial government moved to occupy fertile land on the Waimate Plains that had been "declared confiscated". The Māori leaders, Te Whiti and Tohu, developed tactics of non-violent resistance. Ploughmen fanned out across the fields to assert the Māori's continuing ownership of the land. The government imprisoned several hundred Māori without trial.

The prisoners were released in early 1881 and ploughing resumed. But a government proclamation on 19th October gave the "Parihaka natives" 14 days to accept the reserves offered or face the consequences. They continued to respond peacefully. On 5th November 1881, 1,600 armed volunteers and constabulary field-officers, led by New Zealand's Minister of Native Affairs, John Bryce, marched on Parihaka, evicting upwards of 2000 residents and destroying this western Taranaki settlement. Several thousand Māori sat quietly on the ground singing. John Bryce ordered the arrest of Parihaka's leaders, the destruction of the village and the dispersal of its inhabitants. Devastation ensued. Women were raped by troops, some bearing children as a result.

We have much to learn from the pacificism of these indigenous people in the face of such horrendous aggression. For me, and I hope for you today, the Māori were a living example of Martin Luther King's words nearly a century later. They broke "the chain reaction of evil". No fighting violence with violence, no "hate begetting hate", but pacificism at its best.

Gunpowder? Plots? Violence? Evil? Nah … I'll take the response of the Māori at Parihaka any time – on 5th November or on any other day.

A prayer for today

Praying for peace isn't enough. Working for peace – passive and active – matters too.

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