It is an honour and a privilege for me to have the opportunity to preach on this important occasion and I thank Bishop Tom for his invitation.

It’s also a somewhat daunting task, first of all for an Australian to reflect with you on the significance of Aotearoa’s National Day marking the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi on 6th February 1840.

It’s daunting, too, because of the number of significant occasions and themes which coincide with this day and converge in this event. Not only are we marking Waitangi Day but also Ash Wednesday, beginning the pilgrimage of Lent leading to the Christian festival of the death and resurrection of Christ. On top of that we also mark the beginning of this Diocese’s pilgrimage through its 150th anniversary year.

As if that’s not enough to be thinking about, you will be more aware than I am of the historical and religious significance of this place, Rangiatea, known sometimes, I’m told, as ‘The Maori Cathedral.’ You will know better than I the prophetic significance of the relationship between the great Maori chief Te Rauparaha and the first Pakeha missionary Octavius Hadfield who went on to become the Diocese of Wellington’s second Bishop.

That early relationship of respect and understanding between two leaders seems to be reflected to some extent today in the relationship between the local Iwi and the local Council who, today, mark the 14th anniversary of their coming together to celebrate Waitangi Day.

And in case you’re wondering, I get roped into all this because my home diocese of Brisbane is a companion diocese with Wellington. We have entered into a covenant together to pray for, support and learn from each other as we set about the work God has called us to in our generation.

So there’s no shortage of things to think about today. It is a rich tapestry indeed. No single address could hope to untangle and explore all the threads of meaning and significance that are today woven together and no doubt you’ll be grateful that I won’t attempt to.

What we can do today is to remind ourselves of the wall on which this tapestry hangs, as it were: the wider context, indeed the widest possible context, in which to view the journey of the peoples of this nation and the pilgrimage of this diocese.

I refer, of course, to the story of God’s engagement with the human race, of God’s purposes in human history and of God’s destiny for the whole creation. Because it’s against that backdrop that we can begin to see the direction of our vocation in the present generation, the shape of our mission today.

Bishop Tom Wright masterfully paints that wide canvas in broad brush-strokes. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. But from the beginning human beings got it wrong. They acted destructively and the consequences of sin spread throughout creation marring every aspect of it.

God calls Abraham to deal with the consequences of sin and so that ‘all the families of the earth will be blessed’ (Gen. 12.3).

Abraham’s story gives way to Israel’s who, as we read from Isaiah today was to bring justice to the nations and be alight for the world (Isa 42.1,6), who will set the world to rights.

As the story unfolds two basic truths emerge. The world is in a mess, but it is still loved by God. The dream of Israel was that God would act through Israel to put the whole world to rights. Israel is to be a light to the nations, a source of blessing.

But century after century Israel itself gets it wrong. They sell each other into slavery in Egypt. When God rescues them from slavery in the Exodus, on the way to the promised land all they do is complain about the menu. When they arrive, they eventually get their way and get a king like the other nations and then the king mucks it up. They build a temple where God promises to dwell forever, but it becomes so corrupt that God sends the Babylonians to tear it down.
Israel knew it was called to be a light to the nations, but a long line of pagan nations, one after the other, crushed Israel: the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians – and last of all, by Jesus day, Rome.

So the story of Israel is the story of a people carrying the promises of God for the world, but sorely in need of those promises themselves. Israel clings to the dream that the creator God would act through them to deal with the great issues of the world. But Israel itself is in need of being put to rights.

Israel was supposed to be salt of the earth and a light to the nations but had lost its saltiness and instead of putting its light on a hill had hidden it under a basket.

The story reaches its climax in Jesus. Jesus becomes for Israel what Israel was meant to be for the world. The one who would bring justice to the nations and be a light for the world. Israel had failed but Jesus takes up this vocation himself and embraces Israel’s destiny as the suffering servant (52.13-53.12).

The way God sets the world to rights, the way God chooses to deal with evil, is not through military might but by letting evil do its worst and exhausting it. Suffering itself is redemptive because somehow suffering exhausts evil.

Jesus embraces this identity as Israel's suffering servant messiah.

So Jesus touches the leper. He risks contracting leprosy himself; he risks being ostracized himself from the community, in order to restore the leper. Jesus risks contracting leprosy and the leper contracts Jesus’ life and health.

Jesus touches the dead child, risking corpse impurity himself, and the dead child is raised to life.

Jesus takes on himself their impurity and they receive his life and wholeness.

Throughout his ministry, but especially as he moves towards the cross, Jesus takes on himself the evil and disease of the world. Finally Jesus dies with the robbers and revolutionaries and Barabbas goes free. Jesus dies at the hands of Roman power, not to defeat Rome, but to defeat evil. On the cross all the evil you can imagine focuses down on Jesus, in a terrible kind of vortex, he takes it into himself and somehow overcomes it, exhausts it.

What you see in the life and death of Jesus is Jesus embodying the ancient vocation of Israel. He lives out the servant songs of Isaiah. He embodies Matthew’s sermon on the mount. Israel was called to be a light on a hill, Jesus dies on the hill most visibly. The sermon says that if anyone forces you to go one mile, go an extra mile: Jesus carries his Roman cross all the way to the Golgotha. The sermon says if anyone strikes you on one cheek, turn the other also: Jesus embodies the sermon. He does it. He is the light of the world, the salt of the earth.

The ancient hope of Israel was that God would come back and rescue God's people, and spread justice and salvation over the whole earth. God would re-launch his Israel project. There was going to be an amazing rebirth of God’s original vision of the people of God and the earth. There was going to be a new creation.

It comes in Jesus. When Jesus came and said ‘The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand’, he was saying the day has come. The great story of the people of God through the centuries, the whole of world history, is coming to its climax now! This is the moment. ‘Repent and believe the good news’ meant put aside your own agenda and get on board with Jesus’ agenda. He is the one through whom and in whom the new creation is beginning now!

So, in the gospels, we find that everywhere Jesus goes, new creation happens. When Jesus calms the storm, order is brought out of the chaos of the waters covering the earth, just as it was in the Genesis creation story. Jesus cures the blind, makes the lame walk, sets the captive free. Isaiah’s vision is realized. Wherever he goes creation is set right, healed, renewed. The final evil to be defeated is death itself and that victory is clinched in the resurrection. The new creation is definitively here.

Many people will ask, ‘Well if the new creation is here why does the world look so much like the old messed up world?’ The answer is: it’s not finished yet! Yes, there’s still plenty wrong with the world because we live between the launch of the new creation in Jesus and the time when it will be completed in what the New Testament calls a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21). But it has begun; there’s no turning back.
In the meantime, we have a job to do. ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... and teaching them ... And remember, I am with you always, to end of the age’ (Mat. 28.19-20).

In the version in John’s Gospel Jesus said ‘As the Father sent me, so I send you’ and he breathed the Holy Spirit into them (John 20.21-22).

Whichever version you choose, that’s the mission of the church in a nutshell. We are sent by Jesus, as he was sent by the Father, to spread the ramifications of the resurrection throughout the whole earth. The mission of the church is to implement the resurrection in the power of the Spirit, to participate in the new creation, thereby anticipating the new heaven and the new earth. Mission is bringing the message of new creation to birth in the world now in anticipation of what God will complete in the end.

So mission is not simply about individual salvation, going to heaven when we die. In fact the end envisaged in the New Testament is not us going up to heaven, but a new Jerusalem (a new earth) coming down from heaven to earth so that the dwelling of God is with humans and heaven and earth become one at last, in fulfilment of Jesus’ prayer ‘Your kingdom come on earth as in heaven’.

Mission is not about saving people from a nasty earth which is going over the edge of a cliff and whipping them away to a disembodied home in heaven. No, God is going to renew, heal, restore, immortalize the whole creation. The model is the resurrection of Jesus at Easter.

And mission is bringing to birth in the present, again and again and again, healing and reconciliation and wholeness, until eventually God deals with the whole creation in the same way as he did with Jesus at Easter.

These are very broad brush-strokes. But there’s enough here to tell us who we are and what we are to do. It’s a framework for thinking about mission.

This is the big picture from which we get our bearings as we think about the implications of the Treaty of Waitangi and relationships between Maori and Pakeha in this nation. God will establish justice when creation is renewed and our task is to make that real now in our communities as we anticipate that end.

This is the vision that energized the original missionaries in this diocese whose footsteps you will retrace in pilgrimages during this year. And it will re-energise you as co-creators with God of God’s new creation.

This is the purpose of Ash Wednesday and our Lenten pilgrimage too: to refocus again on God’s purpose in the world and to align our wills with God’s; to will to participate in what God wills.

Let us then give thanks to God for the signs of new creation that have been present in the history of this nation and diocese. And let us strengthen our resolve to implement the implications of the resurrection more and more intentionally, wherever we are until God completes it in a new heaven and a new earth.

Amen.

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