

The FIRST NEW ZEALAND CHRISTMAS

*The story of the first New Zealand Christmas is a very special story that not many people know. Sit back, relax and let me tell **you the** story...*

Two hundred years ago, on the 22nd of December 1814, the sailing ship - the *Active* - slipped into Rangihoua Bay in the Bay of Islands. On board were two friends. A young Māori chief called Ruatara and a chaplain from New South Wales named Samuel Marsden, who Ruatara had renamed Te Mātenga (which means 'the leader').

These two men had met on a sailing ship on a previous voyage when Ruatara had become extremely ill. Samuel Marsden who was on board the same ship, cared for Ruatara and helped him get well and the two men became firm friends. Ruatara, who spoke English, began to teach Samuel Te Reo Māori. In return, Samuel told Ruatara about the Creator God of the Bible, who made the world and everything in it. He told him how God wants each of us to know him and he told Ruatara about Jesus.

When this ship reached Australia, Ruatara spent several months staying with Samuel and his family on his farm. Here, Ruatara had a lot of new experiences, including going to a church. He also learnt about different animals and crops and how to farm them. He wanted to teach his whānau (family/tribe) in New Zealand about all these new things.

Te Pahi, a senior Ngāpuhi chief, who also travelled on whaling boats between New Zealand and Australia, had also met Samuel Marsden. Te Pahi invited Samuel to come and build a mission near his pā in the Bay of Islands, but sadly, Te Pahi died before Samuel arrived.

In December 1814, when the sailing ship *the Active* pulled into Rangihoua Bay it was not only carrying the young Māori chief Ruatara and Samuel Marsden, but many other things that would surprise the local Māori people, including animals that were big enough for men to ride on!

SPLASH! A big spray of water gushed in all directions as the large horse was pushed off the sailing ship, into the sea. Māori wondered what it was as they looked on from the beach. They had never seen a horse before! The horse came up out of the water and Samuel jumped onto its back and rode the horse up and down the beach.

The things that young chief Ruatara had told them were true! There were animals big enough for a man to ride on! That day at Rangihoua Bay in December 1814 was an extraordinary day for Māori as more and more fascinating things emerged from Samuel Marsden's ship *the Active*.

While there were many things that Māori had never seen before coming off the ship, there was also a message Māori had never heard before. Māori already had a belief in Io-nui, the Supreme God, but this would be the first time they would hear about Jesus. This message, brought to them by the early missionaries, would change their lives.

For the Europeans onboard the *Active*, there were also surprises in store. There were many creatures in New Zealand that they had never before seen or heard of. Imagine their fascination when they first heard the peculiar boom of the kakapo, or were charmed at the sight of the astonishing kiwi! In time they would also learn about the highly skilled fishing techniques of Māori and their ability to make beautiful handmade flax cloaks.

When Ruatara and Samuel arrived at Rangihoua Bay, there was enormous excitement. It would soon be Christmas Day and Samuel was going to speak to the local Māori about the most important event ever known - the birth of a boy named Jesus in a faraway land called Palestine. He was the Son of God and would become the greatest teacher and saviour that the world would ever know. He would show all people everywhere that they are all loved by God the Creator.

Ruatara wanted this event to be like the church services he had visited overseas; so he did his best to build an outdoor church, copying the design of the church he had been to in Australia. Ruatara fenced off half an acre of land and then constructed a special platform with a lectern for Samuel to stand behind. He covered the lectern with a long black cloth made from flax. Then he arranged some old waka (canoes) in rows which would act as seats for their guests - the three missionary families that came with Samuel, together with the crew from the ship.

The next morning, Samuel came ashore again and was greeted by Ruatara. Ruatara wore the red military uniform he'd been given when he visited Governor Macquarie in New South Wales. Two other chiefs, Korokoro and Hongi Hika, were also clothed in red military outfits, with swords at their sides.

The missionaries with their very young families, who had also sailed to New Zealand on the *Active*, were ushered to their seats, followed by the sailors and crew. Then Korokoro led his party of men to the right of the lectern and

Ruatara marched his men to the left side. The remainder of the men, women and children and some chiefs from other tribes, gathered around them in a semi-circle facing the lectern.

Samuel was deeply moved as he looked at the group of four hundred Māori waiting patiently and silently for the church service to begin. He sincerely hoped that this would be the beginning of a new chapter for these people.

The service began with the singing of a song from the Bible, called the Old One Hundredth Psalm:

"ALL people that on earth do dwell
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice
Him serve with mirth, His praise forth tell
Come ye before him and rejoice!"

Ruatara took his place beside the lectern to translate the words of the service into Māori as they were spoken. Then Samuel began to tell the magnificent story of the long awaited birth of the boy who was born in the little town of Bethlehem 1800 years earlier. This baby would grow into a man who would prove to everyone the wonderful truth that the Creator God loved all the people of the world. This would bring great joy to everyone, and even to the angels of heaven!

Samuel went on to explain that on the night Jesus was born, an angel sent from God appeared to a small band of shepherds camped around a fire. When the shepherds saw this angel they were terrified, but the angel calmed their fears, telling them not to be frightened. With great delight the angel went on to tell them that he brought good news, that the Saviour of the world had been born! In astonishment, the shepherds listened as the angel described how this important baby had not been born in a palace, but in a stable - with animals! This was to let everyone know that Jesus could be reached by all the men, women and children of the world.

Samuel told the people how this baby would bring great glory to God and great peace to those people on earth who had learned to love God.

During the entire service the people sat in silence as Ruatara translated the words of Samuel. The message they heard was different to anything they had heard before. Some of the people told Ruatara that they did not understand what Samuel meant. Ruatara told them not to worry and that he would explain the meaning of the words after the service.

The local Māori then showed their response by performing an energetic hari haka - about 400 Māori surrounded Samuel, leaping and shouting out the words of the hari haka. It may have felt a bit frightening, especially for the missionaries' small children. Actually, this hari haka was not a threat, but a dance of celebration and welcome. It was about a little bird called the pipiwharau which lays its eggs in the nest of another bird.

To Māori, the pipiwharau was a brave little bird because it was prepared to courageously step out into the unknown and look forward to new and unknown challenges. When they performed this hari haka, Māori were showing that they were open to change.

Several days later Samuel went back to Australia but the three missionary families who had come with him stayed and lived with Ruatara's tribe. As the years went by, the Good News about God's love was spread throughout New Zealand by Māori who travelled and taught other Māori about Jesus. By the 1850s over half of all Māori had accepted the message of Jesus and had learned to love God.

Today the message of God's love hasn't changed and the story of Jesus' coming is just as relevant. God loves every person, regardless of who they are or where they are from.