

## – The Pitcairners' Gift –

In 1856 the Pitcairn Islanders made their six thousand kilometre journey from the eastern to the western Pacific across some of the wild seas of the world, to Norfolk Island. Not just a ride on a Manly ferry. The total population of Pitcairn of 193 persons made that voyage (plus one baby born en route) on the ship HMS *Morayshire* which finally dropped anchor at Kingston, Norfolk Island, on 8 June 1856 after a transit of five weeks. What might these voyagers have thought about their new life in a promised and unknown land?

The idea of the society they would create in this new land would certainly have been one based on Protestant Christianity, as the Pitcairn community at that time was a very devout one. After many years of mayhem on Pitcairn and by the time the *Bounty* settlement was discovered in 1808, John Adams had become the leader of the little community and carried out instruction based on the bible. Over subsequent years English missionary societies of the day, and in particular the evangelical London Missionary Society, took an interest in the welfare of the Pitcairn Islanders and visited them from time to time and provided religious literature. George Hunn Nobbs, who came to Pitcairn in 1828, was to travel back to London in 1852 at the behest of the missionary societies, for ordination as a clergyman by the Bishop of London; and it was as the Reverend Nobbs that he was at the head of the exodus from Pitcairn to Norfolk.

Captain Denham of HMS *Herald*, invited to attend the first evening church service held by the new arrivals in their new home, recorded:

*... when a special thanksgiving was rendered unto God for the preservation vouchsafed, and His guidance implored in the new era they had just entered upon. It was an exemplary manifestation of habitual piety that would not allow fatigue amounting with many to almost exhaustion, nor that excitement in the robust at the extreme novelty of matters around them, to interfere with their wanted primary duty in life ...*

Of course this was not by any means the first or last exodus of a small community by sea to another, unknown, land. In 1865 a small group of Welsh non-conformists set up a colony in far-away Patagonia to practice their religion and culture free of English influence. A much earlier exodus occurred in 1620 when the *Mayflower* set sail from Plymouth, England, for the New World, with 102 passengers and a crew of around 30, to settle at New Plymouth in what is now the US State of Massachusetts. A second group of what later became known as the "Pilgrims" set out in 1630 in nine ships to establish the Massachusetts Bay Settlement. The transit of the Atlantic Ocean of over five thousand kilometres took nine weeks.

The religious leader of that group and declared governor of the settlement was one Rev. John Winthrop aboard the flagship *Arbella*. During the crossing, Winthrop delivered a sermon entitled "A Model of Christian Charity", which in more recent times has achieved some celebrity in the annals of early European US settlement. In this sermon he told his fellow settlers that they had entered into a covenant with God according to which He would cause them to prosper if they maintained their commitment to Him. If they did not then "the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us". Calling on the counsel of Micah he continued:

*... We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.*

When I reflect on my own experience of Norfolk Island of over seventy years, this statement seems to me to encompass outstandingly well the way in which the Norfolk Pitcairners understood the essence of their life on Norfolk Island. It seems to me that it is this that lies at the heart of the gift that the Pitcairners brought to Norfolk Island and have given to and shared freely with its subsequent settlers. It is a gift that should not be squandered under the present circumstances.

- Chris Nobbs

[On 22 January 2019 Australia Post put out a new issue of stamps for Norfolk Island under the title of "Norfolk Island Pitcairn Settlement".]

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