Bishop Ross Bay preached at St Andrew's Kohimarama on Sunday 15th April. The service marked the 150th anniversary of the establishment of the Melanesian Mission Trust Board. The readings were Genesis 1:26-28, 1 Timothy 6:17-19, and Matthew 25:13-30.

In the years just before Bishopscourt was built in Parnell, the Selwyns lived in the house we call the Old Deanery. For those who know the area, it is the stone house on the corner of Brighton Rd and St Stephen's Ave. It was built to house the Dean of the Cathedral but it was a little ahead of its time because it was decades before a Dean was ever appointed and a century before there was a Cathedral. So it has never housed a Dean. But Selwyn called it The Deanery, and so we call it the Old Deanery.

Picture it then in the 1860s with little to disturb the view north and east from the top of the St Stephens Ave hill. Sarah Selwyn loved the view and I have a memory of an entry in her diary that says something to the effect of being able to look across the fields and "see our dear friend Coley riding up from Kohimarama to come and visit us."

Coley was John Coleridge Patteson, by then in charge of the Melanesian Mission and its school based down at Mission Bay where the stone Tamaki Drive buildings so familiar to us now sit. Selwyn had recruited Patteson with this purpose in mind and brought him to New Zealand in 1855. Patteson gained the confidence of Selwyn for the work and they became firm friends.

Well we can no longer look so clearly down to Kohimarama from Bishopscourt, but the sense for me of being here among friends is strong. I served my first curacy here and am glad to look out upon the familiar faces of friends. Among them I count Archbishop David who was studying at St John's College at that time and worshipped here at St Andrew's along with Mary and the children. That has often been the pattern with this church maintaining the link between the establishment of the Mission, its early martyrs, and the ongoing partnership which is embodied in the Melanesian Mission Trust Board and in those here in Auckland who have served and continue to serve the Church in Melanesia. So this Martyrs Memorial Church is an obvious place for Melanesian students to worship.

Of course you have only to drive around the area to find yourself confronted at every turn of a corner with the names of those who served the Mission in those early days: Atkin, Palmer, Codrington, Nihill, Dudley and more.

We gather here appropriately today then to give thank for the foresight of Selwyn and Patteson in establishing the Trust 150 years ago this coming week, and to recommit ourselves to its good stewardship and the resultant support for the ongoing work of God's mission through the Anglican Church in Melanesia.

So then let me remind you of a little of the history of those beginnings, and offer some thoughts on a theology of the mission in which God has graciously given us a part.

In 1861 Patteson was ordained Bishop here in Auckland and the Diocese of Melanesia was created. All of this was very new and unusual, the consecration of a bishop outside British territory without letters patent to authorise the act. It was one of the many ways in which Selwyn took initiative for

the sake of God's mission while the parent Church struggled to determine the right structures for new branches of the Church of England as what would become the worldwide Anglican Communion began to emerge.

The myth is that Melanesia was included by accident within the See of New Zealand when Selwyn was given his commission by the Archbishop of Canterbury, some slip of the pen in the recording of the degrees longitude. It's a good myth and whatever the truth of it, Selwyn took seriously the responsibility of the work of mission in this largely unknown part of God's world. From an early time it was the vision of an indigenous church that he held, the establishment of the school being the means by which Melanesians could be trained and then sent back to evangelise their own people.

Not everyone was convinced by this strategy, including Patteson himself, and in the end it was not that successful, not least because of the struggle for Melanesians to cope with the climate here, the winter taking a severe toll. But the strategy itself did not bear much immediate fruit, though to be fair such is often the way with fledgling missionary work. Patteson was determined that the work must be done in the islands themselves and in one of the languages of Melanesia. He carried the goal of establishing Melanesian priests and ultimately of Melanesian bishops presiding over the life of the church there. That latter goal took a century to fulfil, but the idea of it was there at the start within a theology of mission that understood the contextualisation of the gospel and the effectiveness of that gospel being transmitted between people of the same culture and ethnicity.

In this respect the CMS missionaries, Selwyn and Patteson were of a similar mind, though they understood different means of achieving this end, and we look back not uncritically at any of them, just as successive generations will do the same to us in good time. The relationship between gospel and culture is complex and dynamic. We need to discern the ways in which the gospel illuminates, challenges and transforms culture as well as the ways in which culture illuminates and incarnates the gospel.

So we do our best to grapple with the best theological principles of mission as we understand them in our time and to apply them to the task of mission in the best way that we are able. For it is better that we engage in God's mission imperfectly than not to do so at all for want of the perfect strategy.

These then were people of vision. Patteson laboured hard in the fulfilment of that vision, his travels opening up many of the islands of Melanesia to the possibility of the gospel message, and battling along the way the evil of the slave labour trade. This both dehumanised Melanesian people and added a barrier to the mission task, with the missionaries inevitably identified at times with those who perpetrated the trade. This was the background to Patteson's death, a tragedy and yet ironically perhaps a major factor in the expansion of the Mission. It helped create the impetus to laws that shut down the trade, and was a further inspiration to those who would follow to be part of the mission task.

The principles of contextualisation, of indigenous leadership growing out of a true partnership, of the costliness of joining in this gospel work through the confronting of evil and through being present in spite of such evil – these are the marks of a theology of mission that underpinned that early work and which can rightly still be a basis for what we do now. It continues to be seen in

Melanesia, most vividly in recent times through the deaths of seven members of the Melanesian Brotherhood as they sought to be agents of reconciliation in Christ.

There is a privilege in being part of the ongoing work of the Church of Melanesia and seeing now how much of the hopes of the 1850s and 60s have come to pass. One of the things that its first two bishops understood well was the need for this work to be well resourced. Selwyn had applied that principle here in New Zealand and we benefit greatly from it in our day.

The original settlement of land in this area into a trust, the income of which would support the work in Melanesia has grown through the diligent work of the Trustees through the years and the investment advice of the trust managers. The result today is significant funds applied to educational and other charitable purposes in Melanesia.

In 2007 Trustees gained the support of MPs in progressing a Bill through Parliament to ensure the continued income tax exemption of the Trust's income so that the maximum benefit would continue to be enjoyed in Melanesia. Something like 94% of the Church of Melanesia's funding comes from the Trust's distributions and MPs in their speeches on the Bill lauded the many projects and facilities that exist as a result.

The final word then must be one about stewardship. As I said earlier, we gather in thanksgiving for the foresight of 1862 and for the careful work of 150 years in protecting and growing the Trust. With thanksgiving for the past must always come fresh commitment for the present and the future.

The Scripture readings have challenged us today about what we do with what God has entrusted to us. It is a challenge for the work of the Trustees here as you continue to exercise the best management possible of the Trust's assets to maximise the benefit to Melanesia. It is a challenge also to the Church in Melanesia to make the best use of what is provided to you for your work of mission locally. If a 19th century vision was to grow indigenous leadership so that the principle of the transmission of the gospel by people of your own culture might be fulfilled, perhaps part of a 21st century vision might be about developing ways in which dependence on external funds can be reduced. For both people and money coming from outside can be sources of unintentioned and unconscious colonialism.

Above all it is a dedication of the heart that God seeks. On the morning of the 20th September 1871, the day of Patteson's death, he had taught a class of boys on board the Southern Cross before he went ashore. The lessons was on the death of St Stephen the first Christian martyr. As he finished he said to the boys, "This might happen to any of us, to you or to me. It might happen today."