



OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER
HON MARK BROWN
GOVERNMENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS

**PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECH DURING THE OPENING OF THE BICENTENNIAL
CELEBRATIONS, AITUTAKI, 21 OCTOBER 2021**

Kia orana kotou katoatoa,

Thank you Mayor Bishop, I acknowledge all the previous speakers, distinguished guests, and everyone who has travelled to be here.

Now, as we look forward together to the next 10 days of celebrations and commemorations, there are a few people to thank for helping make this great event possible.

- I acknowledge Aitutaki communities in the Cook Islands and NZ/Australia for their contributions in cash and in-kind and acknowledge the other Pa Enua communities in the Cook Islands for their contributions in cash and in-kind.
- A vote of thanks to the two Bicentennial Organisation Committees (the Mayors Bicentennial Committee and the CICC Bicentennial Celebrations Committees – Rarotonga and Aitutaki) for their co-operation in ensuring a happy and successful celebration.
- The Government's contributions to the celebrations – Cabinet and National Govt (\$269,000 cash), Island Govt of Aitutaki, DPM, MOCD, Parliament, etc. have also helped to bring this occasion to fruition.

One year ago today, we came together as a nation to celebrate the Cook Islands Games. A hugely successful event that lifted our collective spirits.

Together we gather as a nation on Aitutaki.

We are here today to commence our official celebrations in honour of the 200-year anniversary of the arrival of the Christian faith in the Cook Islands.

We are a Christian nation. Our faith sustains us, it guides and inspires us, it is the rock upon which we base much of how we go about our daily lives.

Look around you. The presence of so many of us here today – even as so many similar gatherings around the world are unable to take place due to COVID-19 – is surely proof enough not only of the great importance we as Cook Islanders place upon our Christian faith but also of what that sincere and enduring faith has helped us achieve.

As the American gospel singer Mahalia Jackson – a black woman who overcame poverty and prejudice to deliver God's Word to millions around the world – once said, 'Faith and prayer are the vitamins of the soul – man cannot live in health without them'.

Yes, the Christian faith remains an integral part of our Cook Islands identity – we cannot live in good health without it.

And this has been the case for almost the full 200 years since the Gospel first arrived on our shores, delivered hereto Aitutaki by the Tahitian missionaries Papeiha and Vahapata, brought to this island by the Reverend John Williams of the London Missionary Society on October 26, 1821.

Within the span of a few short decades, our entire nation had been converted. Embraced early on by our Ui Ariki, Christianity helped bring about a new way of life in the Cook Islands, reducing conflict and fostering peace and harmony between our different island communities.

'Upon this rock I will build my church' – so said Jesus to the fisherman Simon, who would become His discipline Peter. One can imagine on this very ... this very Scripture being quoted by the missionaries Papeiha and Vahapata 200 years ago, as they set about building our nation's first church here at Arutanga, ably assisted by the strong fishermen of Aitutaki.

Many more churches would follow, and then in 1839 the Takamoa Theological College on Rarotonga, which would eventually send its Cook Islands-trained pastors, church leaders and evangelists out across the Pacific in their hundreds, spreading the Good Word to our Pacific neighbours and beyond.

Later, in 1852, the London Missionary Society founded the Cook Islands LMS Church, which would later become the Cook Islands Christian Church we know today thru an act of Parliament in 1968. With an estimated 18,000 members across the Cook Islands, New Zealand and Australia, the CICC has not only maintained but expanded the legacy of the LMS, and it continues its good work to this very day.

Also in 1968, the Cook Islands Religious Advisory Council was founded to help advise our political and traditional leaders on key issues affecting the social and cultural development of our people, as well as to oversee the many religious events, undertakings, observances and community programmes that are so much a part of our everyday life here in the Cook Islands.

Yes, there is no doubt that we are a Christian people.

The history and strength of our Christianity was brought home to me on my recent visit to the island of Tongareva.

On the way from Tetautua village to Omoka, we were able to visit the motu Mangarongaro and also Tepuka to view two of the earliest churches built by hand by the communities on those motu during the late 1800s. All that stands today are the sturdy rock walls plastered with ngaika, a limestone paste.

The last services held in these churches was before 1900 when the settlements on the various motu of Tongareva were resettled to the two villages that we know today.

The walls stand silent but strong after being abandoned for more than 100 years. Abandoned but not neglected – they are kept clean by the island even after all these years.

The building are a silent but striking testament to the strength and endurance of our nation's Christianity, even in our most remote communities.

Yet as strong as our Christianity is, we as Cook Islanders also acknowledge the contributions of other denominations and churches to the spiritual development of our nation.

Despite our religious differences, the tenets of our Christian faith dictate that we exhibit mutual respect and tolerance towards our fellow man as it says in Ephesians 4;2 – with humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another in love. It goes further in verse 7 – But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. In verse 11 it says of the gifts he have to the people "he gave some apostles and some prophets, and some evangelists and some pastors and teachers". Each exalting and upholding the work of Christ.

So while we commemorate the first arrival lets us not forget those that also came after Papehia to say and do as Jesus said – "Upon this rock I will build my church."

In August this year we celebrated the 56th years of our political independence. So our political independence has a long way to go to catch up with the 200 years of our spiritual independence. ? Some of us may think 200 years is a long time but let us not forget the Good News arrived on this Earth more than 2000 years ago through the body of Christ. So let us not wait for the big milestones to celebrate our salvation – celebrate it every day. Because this is the day that the Lord has made we will rejoice and be glad in it.

Kia Orana e kia manua.