

## Engaging with Matariki

Mark Hood Redeemer Church 13/07/23



We pray and work to have Kiwis to engage with God's gospel story, so it is entirely reasonable to set ourselves as a church family to engage with the Māori story of Matariki.

I confess to being ignorant when it comes to understanding the value and meaning of Matariki to fellow Māori Kiwis. So I've sought to investigate with an attitude of genuine enquiry, seeking to know ones' neighbour and to better appreciate our nation's public holiday Friday.

Matariki is the Māori name for the cluster of stars visible in mid-winter, and for many Māori this marks the start of the new year. It gives opportunity for people to come together, reflect on the year that has passed, celebrate the present, and plan for the future. Different iwi mark Matariki in different ways:

Dr. Rangi Matamua (Tūhoe) was named New Zealander of the year in 2023 in recognition of his work to raise awareness of Matariki [1]. He says this celebration is 'spiritual in terms of remembering those who have passed during the year and releasing their spirits. It is [also] cultural, in terms of the practices we go through to acknowledge the year, and it's social, a gathering point for all people to come together and celebrate what has happened in the year gone and let it go, to celebrate who we are presently, and to wish for the promise of a new season and a new year.' [2]

For Ngāti Kahungunu in Hawkes Bay, Te Rangi Huata, event organiser says the ceremony has three main parts: 'a reading of the stars for how prosperous the coming season will be, remembrance of those who have passed away by calling out their names, and a food offering (hautapu) made to the stars'. [3]

For Te Arawa leaders in the Bay of Plenty, the Matariki public holiday is a time to develop and foster the Māori language, culture, and traditions passed down from ancestors. The pre-dawn ceremony begins with karakia (prayers) and a food offering ceremony called hautapu or umu kohukohu whetū. Food is prepared in an umu of or hāngī. Steam from the food is released rising to be 'eaten by the stars' with the people's hope that the following year's harvest is plentiful. Another important element involves honouring and remembering loved ones who have died in the year just passed, believing that the Pōhutukawa star will care for loved ones. Matariki is also seen as a time to leave behind the struggles and bad choices of the year gone by and reset goals and aspirations as an individual or group leading into the year ahead, with the Hiwa-i-te rangi star the one who can make all these dreams and aspirations a reality. [4]

### **Given these accounts, how to engage with Matariki?**

It's easy to be positive about gathering with whānau and friends to share kai and to mark the turning of a year. After all our 'day after New Year's Day' affirms family, hospitality and rest. To have another opportunity to gather with friends and whānau is welcome.

That said, we're do well to hear the appeal of Rereata Makiha, Māori astrologer and expert on the maramataka (lunar calendar). He doesn't want to see Matariki become a meaningless public holiday where people simply use the occasion to get drunk: "that's just a waste of time," he says. [2]

We can also agree that it's valuable to cultivate thankfulness for loved ones lost: Christians believe when other people love us and serve us, they are expressions of love and care from God himself - who brought these wonderful people into our life - so it's only right that we honour and give thanks to God.

In addition, we affirm the importance of looking back to the past as a help for the present and a guide to the future. In doing so Māori culture practises a commitment God's people have always had, and continue to have. So, we say: "*Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.*" To a western world that often seems preoccupied with the present, it is humbling and helpful not to forget yesterday as we plan for tomorrow and live serving God today.

Where there is much we affirm, Christians naturally resist considering the stars to be divine [4]. Elevating the stars like this is making the grave error of putting the creation in place of the Creator. That said, Matariki does remind us to get outside and look up and see the magnitude of this universe as the handiwork of our majestic God. He 'put the stars in their place' (Psalm 8). Our world often attempts to

establish 'me' as the centre of the universe. A little stargazing quickly brings home how puny we are, and how specular the incarnation of the Lord Jesus really is: God has become a man! (John 1:14)

Furthermore, directing wishes or prayers to a wishing star is to worship the creation instead of the Creator. This does God a profound disservice and puts us at odds with Him. Besides which, what star has ever promised to hear and answer our prayers as the Lord our God has promised to and answer us?

Similarly, the practice of offering food to the stars for the sake of the coming year's harvest is demeaning to God. It is committing the error of looking to the creation instead of the Creator. Our eyes are to go to God. Psalm 145:15 *'The eyes of all look to you [O LORD], and you give them their food in due season'*. Jesus says: *'Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.'* (Matthew 6:31-33). Accordingly, the Lord Jesus teaches us to pray to our heavenly Father: *'Give us today our daily bread'*.

What's more, the offering and sacrifice needed for our eternal life, including our daily life, has already been made. It is offering of the God-man, once for all upon the cross. When Jesus died outside the city of Jerusalem, he died as an offering for our sins. Our life with God, including the forgiveness of sins, our health, our sustenance, and our future are all tied up in him. The offering to be made by people who've received this gift of God, is not an annual offering of kai. It's the daily offering of ourselves as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1-2), gladly serving God and others in love.

### **How will you engage with others over this Matariki long weekend?**

Some of us too quickly dismiss things that are different. When we do this, we miss an opportunity to engage another person who (like everyone) is in need of the Saviour Jesus. I encourage us to find ways to open up conversations rather than be dismissive.

On the other hand, others of us can approach spiritual things with a naïve 'it's all good' attitude. I make this mistake myself. Recently we've read through 1 Thessalonians where the Apostle Paul urges us to *'test everything; hold fast to that which is good'*. In so far as a spiritual idea sidelines God our Creator, overlooks the teaching of Jesus, diverts attention away from his offering once for all, and / or fails to encourage love for fellow Christians, Paul teaches us to re-direct attention towards the coming Lord Jesus Christ.

What might re-directing a Matariki conversation involve? Here are three ideas.

- Beginning the marvel of the stars, it's easy to move to praising the majesty & goodness of our Maker;
- Acknowledging the grief and loss of death can (and should) lead us to look to him who has conquered death for our sake, to the risen Lord Jesus who rules over every tribe and nation: He is our sure hope;
- Recognising our smallness, weakness and fleetingness should cause us to cry out to him who saves us to live with him in eternity: *so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16)*.

I hope you enjoy our Matariki long weekend. Do engage with whanau and friends, share in hospitality, grieve loved ones lost and by all means pray: but pray and direct your hearts to him who loves us, to the risen Jesus, the light of the world who invites us to come to him saying: *I Jesus, have sent my testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.'* (Rev 22:16)

In Christ, Mark

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[1] Prof Rangi Matamua, the man behind Matariki, 'humbled' by New Zealander of the Year win <https://www.stuff.co.nz/pou-tiaki/131661290/prof-rangi-matamua-the-man-behind-matariki-humbled-by-new-zealander-of-the-year-win/>

[2] What is Matariki, the Māori new year? <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/explained/300059151/what-is-matariki-the-mori-new-year>

[3] Matariki celebrations began atop Te Mata Peak <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/kahu/matariki-celebrations-began-atop-te-mata-peak/EOJ3QQN7U23NHX3Z6EWRYZW3XE/>

[4] Matariki - more than just a public holiday <https://www.teaomaori.news/matariki-more-just-public-holiday>

[5] Matariki is actually an abbreviation of 'Ngā Mata o te Ariki' – The eyes of the god. The god referred to is Tāwhirimātea. According to Māoritanga: when Ranginui, the sky father, and Papatūānuku, the earth mother, were separated from their dark embrace by Tāne, Tāwhirimātea was distraught. He tore out his eyes, crushed them into pieces and stuck them onto the chest of the sky. This is why Tāwhirimātea is the blind god, feeling his way around the sky and bringing winds from different directions. Matariki and Māori astronomy with Dr Rangi Matamua <https://www.mcguinnessinstitute.org/foresightnz/matariki-and-maori-astronomy-with-dr-rangi-matamua/>