

A Christian looks at ...

Matariki

The celebration of Matariki is now embedded in New Zealand national life, a Māori tradition recognised in a public holiday. It marks the New Year on the Māori calendar with festivities, rituals and prayers within an ancient mythology involving the Matariki constellation of stars. Partly because of this, and partly because of popular sentiment around “things Māori,” many in New Zealand are uncertain as to what to do with Matariki.

Turning to the Bible as God’s word, this booklet aims to help readers understand the true significance given Matariki by its Creator. In particular, it aims to help Christians worship God faithfully and to engage with their communities in Christ-centred life and witness as the nation celebrates Matariki.

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What the Bible Says about Fellowship with False Religion

Be separate:

Ephesians 5:11 “Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.”

2 Corinthians 6:14-17 “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said ... ‘Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord.’”

Stand up and praise the LORD your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting:

Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.

Nehemiah 9:5,6

What the Bible Says about Praying to the Stars

God has expressly forbidden prayer to or the worship of the stars:

Deuteronomy 4:19 “And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars—all the heavenly array—do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshipping things the LORD your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven.”

Praying to and worshipping the stars is evidence of God departing from people who have rejected him. The depraved minds of people who worship creation are evidence that God has given them over to his judgement:

Acts 7:42 “But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars.”

Romans 1:25-28 “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator ... just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done.”

What the Bible Says about Worshipping God

God alone is to be worshipped:

Exodus 20:3 “You shall have no other gods before me.”

Deuteronomy 6:13,14 “Fear the LORD your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name. Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you.”

Matthew 4:10 “Jesus said to him, ‘Away from me, Satan! For it is written: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.”’”

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praise him, all you shining stars ... Let them praise the name of the LORD, for at his command they were created.”

The stars are terminal, not eternal:

Isaiah 34:4 “All the stars in the sky will be dissolved, and the heavens rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shrivelled figs from the fig tree.”

Isaiah 65:17 “I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.”

Revelation 6:13,14 “The stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.”

2 Peter 3:12,13 “That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.”

The stars are part of the creation that gives every person in every place and in every time in history the knowledge that God is God, leaving no one with an excuse for not worshiping and serving him:

Romans 1:20 “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.”

*The heavens declare the glory of God.
Psalm 19:1*

Colossians 1:15,16 “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created.”

Hebrews 1:2 “God has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.”

Genesis 1:16,17 “God ... also made the stars. God set them in the vault of the sky.”

God had very specific purposes in creating the stars: they reveal his glory and at the same time they mark out days, years and seasons for people.

Revelation 4:11 ““You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”

Psalms 19:1-4 “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”

Genesis 1:15-18 “And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.’ And it was so. God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good.”

Psalms 148:1-5 “Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights above ... praise him, all his heavenly hosts ...

Introduction

He who made Matariki and Orion,
who turns midnight into dawn
and darkens day into night,
who calls for the waters of the sea
and pours them out over the face of the land—
the LORD is his name.

Amos 5:8¹

The celebration of *Matariki* is now embedded in New Zealand community life, a public holiday imbued with outspokenly Māori significance and connection. It has been around for a while, but its elevation into “official” status, keenly anticipated by advocates, was unexpected by many sectors of the community. Here was a relatively unknown indigenous festival made a national holiday at a time when ethnic, racial and cultural issues are reshaping our world.

For some, that, along with almost everything else to do with Matariki, has been confrontational and unwanted. For others, national recognition of Matariki is as much a matter of celebration as their celebration of the festival itself. But for all of us in New Zealand it is now something we inescapably engage with in one way or another, even if only as a public holiday.

Matariki is basically two things:

1. **It is a star-cluster or constellation** (known in the West as the *Pleiades*) that God has created² and with the other

¹ Throughout this booklet, *Matariki* has been substituted for “the Pleiades” in quotations from English Bible translations.

² Genesis 1:1; Isaiah 40:28; John 1:3; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2

stars, made visible in the night sky for his glory.³ Matariki is specifically mentioned in Bible as such.⁴ God created Matariki, along with all the stars, and anchored them in place in space⁵ to mark out and govern days and seasons.⁶

Matariki is seen at different times of the year around the world. It is known by hosts of different names (including the Greek *Pleiades* in western traditions, *Subaru* in Japan, *mao* among the Chinese, and *Makali'i* in Hawaii), appearing in the northern hemisphere around October where it traditionally indicated the beginning of winter.

It appears each year in New Zealand in mid-winter, where in Māori tradition it signifies the start of a New Year and can influence the timing of the planting and harvesting of crops.

2. **It is a season in Māori tradition**, initiated each year when the star-cluster re-appears (having set some three months earlier). Because the timing of its re-appearance varies with location,⁷ and because of the way it is linked with the phases of the moon, the timing of the season itself varies across the different regions in New Zealand.

In its most basic form, Matariki is a season of remembrance and hope, thanksgiving and sharing, joy and peace. Traditionally it has also been closely associated with unbiblical beliefs and rituals; with various pantheistic concepts of ancestors deified in the stars; of those stars, ancestors, or gods generating, procreating, or creating the

³ Psalm 19:1; Revelation 4:11

⁴ Job 9:9; 38:31,32; Amos 5:8

⁵ Matariki, in particular, is “chained” or bound in place - Job 38:31

⁶ Genesis 1:14-17; Job 38:32,33

⁷ Matariki appears at different times depending on latitude, and its association with various stars and phases of the moon has different significance for different iwi.

What the Bible Says About Matariki

The Bible identifies the Matariki constellation in three passages as something God has created and controls:

Amos 5:8 “He who made Matariki [the Pleiades]⁵⁷ and Orion, who turns midnight into dawn and darkens day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out over the face of the land—the LORD is his name.”

Job 9:8-10 “God alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea. He is the Maker of the Bear and Orion, Matariki and the constellations of the south. He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted.”

Job 38:31-33 “Can you bind the chains of Matariki? Can you loosen Orion's belt? Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs? Do you know the laws of the heavens? Can you set up God's dominion over the earth?”

What the Bible Says About the Stars

Not only did God create the stars, he did so by speaking them into existence, and he did so before he had created people – so in no sense do people become stars!

Genesis 1:1 “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

John 1:1-3 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”

⁵⁷ English translations use the name “the Pleiades” for the Matariki constellation.

and in the state-promoted celebration of Matariki. But Christians don't have to conform to the state's paganism!⁵¹

In fact, Christians are *never* to conform to the state in the worship of God, whatever the state commands. Even when the state commands God be worshipped,⁵² we do not worship God because the state says to, but because God says to. Christians are not to “conform to the pattern of this world,”⁵³ for our whole lives are to be “a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.”⁵⁴

It is with renewed minds and true worship that Christians regularly remember with thanks any family members who have died, and remember those pioneers of the faith who have run the race before us.⁵⁵ We daily give thanks for the grace of God in our lives, and we constantly encourage each other in the sure and certain hope of eternity we have in Christ.⁵⁶

So we *could* use Matariki to refresh ourselves, our family and our church in such fundamentals of our Christian faith if we wish to. We *could* even use Matariki to testify to our neighbours that there is a biblical approach to remembering, celebrating and looking to the future that is found in Christ. What follows in this chapter can help with that.

Parents will want to be alert to the way Matariki is explained and celebrated in their children's schools too. Parents may or may not want to engage with those schools about Matariki, but at the very least parents may want to nurture in their children a biblical approach to the issues Matariki raises. What follows should also help with that.

⁵¹ Daniel 3:18; Matthew 22:21; Acts 5:29

⁵² Daniel 6:26,27

⁵³ Romans 12:2

⁵⁴ Romans 12:1

⁵⁵ Hebrews 11

⁵⁶ Hebrews 6:19

universe or elements of it; the making of sacrifices of food and steam to the stars; and the bringing of luck and good harvests.

With the contemporary revival of the festival, that association has been given unrivalled traction by the “secular” state and media, but not all celebrate Matariki, and not all who do celebrate Matariki buy into either the traditional or the new paganism.

With this booklet I hope to help Christians in New Zealand understand the true significance given Matariki by its Creator, and help them manage their engagement with this national day faithfully as citizens of heaven⁸ – “aliens and strangers in the world.”⁹ I also hope that readers who are not Christian will gain an understanding of why Christians do not see the Matariki constellation in the same religious context as is being popularised, and might not celebrate Matariki in the same way as do others – if at all.

Michael L Drake
June, 2023

⁸ Ephesians 2:19; Philippians 3:20

⁹ 1 Peter 2:11 (KJV)

3. A Biblical Matariki

It hardly needs saying that God embedded days and years in creation in such a way that they inescapably shape the lives of everyone in every culture in every place in the world. So whatever seasons and annual events of creation are part of our own cultural context, when we respond to those seasons and events, we are just as inescapably responding to God's providence, albeit we can make that response in faith or in sin.

Most Christians celebrate personal birthdays ... and why not! Many of us also celebrate various anniversaries, such as wedding anniversaries, church anniversaries, and, of course, New Year's Day. As already noted, most of us also happily take part in national days even if it is only by way of having a holiday.

How we engage in those celebrations is varied, but there would be few Christians who do not take those opportunities to thank God for his care in the past and present, and to ask for his guidance in the future. For any faithful Christian, those celebrations will also include our testifying to those around us of our thanks to God, confidence in Christ, and hope for the fulfilment of God's promises in the future.

Matariki *could* be used by Christians in that way. As noted earlier, the three key activities for celebrating Matariki are remembering the past and those who have died, celebrating the present, and looking to the future. Each of those have expressly unbiblical, anti-Christian, pantheistic, and polytheistic elements in both the traditional Māori Matariki celebrations,

2. We need to never lose sight of this: for all that we treasure in our various cultures and heritage, there are no ethnic or cultural distinctions in Christ or the church “for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”⁴⁶
3. We need to recognise that for over 200 years there have been Christian Māori who have acknowledged the New Year signalled by Matariki in a truly Christian way just as many Christians celebrate 1 January in a Christian way.
4. We need to make clear to all that all the pagan ideas, rituals and activities associated with Matariki are an abomination to Christians and offensive to God, and have no fellowship⁴⁷ with deeds of darkness.⁴⁸
5. We need to strengthen Christians in their biblical understanding of what it is to live as citizens of heaven, foreigners and exiles among the pagans.⁴⁹
6. We need to affirm that it is for his glory and through Jesus that God created, orders, and sustains the universe.⁵⁰
7. We need to take up the opportunity of Matariki to live and proclaim the gospel – it is one thing (and a necessary thing) to be counter-cultural – but what an opportunity Matariki gives us, whether within our own heritage culture or in a cross-cultural context, to proclaim the true gospel of the only true God of all who is Creator, Judge, Saviour and Lord!

⁴⁶ Galatians 3:28,29

⁴⁷ 2 Corinthians 6:14-17 – Just as we would reject and separate from the paganism of Janus opening the gateway to new beginnings in the Roman mythology if it were part of contemporary celebrations of 1 January as New Year’s Day.

⁴⁸ Ephesians 5:11

⁴⁹ 1 Peter 2:11

⁵⁰ Genesis 1:1; Genesis 8:22; John 1:3; Hebrew 1:2,3

1. Surprised by Matariki?

The inauguration in 2022 of a public holiday for Matariki took lots of New Zealanders by surprise despite nearly 20 years of discussion, petitions, and debate in the media and in parliament. Surprisingly, many commented that they had never heard of Matariki, or if they had, that they had no recollection of it being celebrated by anyone in previous years. Certainly, it has seldom been acknowledged and never celebrated by the general public of New Zealand until this century. Accordingly, few took note of its somewhat benign arrival in our national cultural mix until its observation was made a national event.

Legislating an annual holiday to celebrate Matariki had obvious political significance for the government of the day, but that tended to increase rather than allay the suspicion of many that celebrating Matariki is a subversive innovation, if not a politically convenient invention. It is equally evident that many New Zealanders, Māori and Pākehā, have promoted Matariki as something that both honours Māori tikanga and increases the public and political significance of that tikanga. Yet the reality is that Matariki is neither an innovation nor invention: it has been actively celebrated by Māori throughout the recorded history of New Zealand.

In the 1850s, for example, the missionary Richard Taylor recorded Matariki being celebrated, but noted that although it was common and widespread, different iwi celebrated it in different ways at slightly different times. That seems to have continued until the 1940s.

The fact that there were different ways of celebrating Matariki, and that it was celebrated at slightly different times meant that although it was a “public” event in Māori communities and where Māori were prominent, there was never a

unified version of it across the whole of New Zealand. As a consequence, non-Māori communities have till now been largely unaware of it. Nevertheless, it was prominent in Māori communities until after the Second World War.

In the 1940s public celebration ended fairly rapidly, although it continued to be celebrated in family/whānau contexts. It is not clear why public celebration waned, but it probably had to do with several things, including the incredibly intense national patriotism carried over from the Second World War, in which manifestations of Māori culture were minimised or adapted to the national ethos; and the urbanisation of Māori that saw changes in perception of Māori identity, and the place and practice of tradition.

However, from the 1940s to today, Matariki has been celebrated within numerous hapū and whānau, and from among those groups come recollections of happy times spent with elders (especially the kuia - grandmothers) each year as they told Matariki stories (many, of course, rich in traditional mythology). The occasion has traditionally been used to gather for thanksgiving, special meals, with special karakia/prayers (pagan or Christian as the case might be), and sometimes with other celebrations such as kite-flying.¹⁰

From the beginning of the 21st Century, communal Matariki celebrations became increasingly popular, rapidly becoming public celebrations in various ways (for example, by 2008, Matariki was so much a part of public culture that NZ Post issued a set of Matariki stamps, a now annual event). For many non-Māori (and for some Māori for that matter!) the existence of the celebration and its increasingly public celebration at that, went largely unnoticed. But it has also been

¹⁰ Traditionally kites were flown by Māori for a variety of reasons at different times, including for recreation, communication, and divination; and in some traditions for communicating with the dead and connecting heaven and earth.

thanksgiving, with great family fellowship and meals, and by planning prayerfully for the future, we also need to be conscious that not every believer has yet escaped bondage to the idols. So we need to use our freedom in a way that does not undermine the faith of others.⁴³

We have the freedom in Christ to choose to celebrate or use Matariki in a way that honours Christ, encourages other believers, makes Christ known, and expresses love for our neighbours; and we have the freedom in Christ to choose *not* to celebrate or use Matariki. What will guide us in making that choice is not only what we want and might enjoy, but how what we do encourages other believers and witnesses to unbelievers.

If we choose to, we can use Matariki to thank God for the salvation we have in Jesus and his faithfulness to us and our tupuna. We can thank God for all that he has given us, including family, health and provision of food. Just as many in other cultures look to the future at the celebration of their particular New Year, so we can give thanks for and pray for the hope we have in Christ for the year to come, and for eternity. We can use Matariki to share our food, our fellowship and the gospel with those around us.

Matariki's present prominence – for whatever reasons and whether or not it is seen as traditional or innovative – presents challenges and opportunities for the Church of Christ:

1. We need to use and preserve our freedom in Christ to love and encourage one another,⁴⁴ rejoicing in and respecting the various cultural perspectives that, when in submission to Christ and the Bible, enrich Christ's church.⁴⁵

⁴³ 1 Corinthians 8:9-13

⁴⁴ Hebrews 10:23-25

⁴⁵ Romans 12:15-18; 1 Corinthians 10:27-33; Revelation 5:9

with which you identify – and that is as varied as being European means having a European heritage as part of your identity. Being Māori doesn't mean having identical beliefs and ways of life as every Māori, as if "Māoriness" is monolithic.

My own Māori heritage is, for example, expressly Christian. My tupuna (ancestors) welcomed the gospel when it reached Kaikoura in the 1800s, and my grandmother and mother taught me to cherish the Bible, to read it, to use it, and to know it thoroughly – contributing, I have no doubt, to my coming to know Jesus as my Saviour.

Romans 14 makes it clear that believers are free to make something special of particular days, so long as they do it to Christ; and that we must not judge others for doing what they do for Christ or for doing something different from us. Christians are free to observe Matariki in a Christ-centred way or to make nothing of it at all. And we are to respect others who differ with us in their Christ-centred engagement or non-engagement with Matariki without judgment, and without attempting to conform them to our practices.

The lessons of 1 Corinthians 8 are also pertinent: the pantheistic idols and idolatry attached by some to Matariki are nothing. The stars of Matariki are not gods, they are not the eyes cast into the sky by Tāwhirimātea, they are not our tupuna; they are not one with God – they are impersonal things created by God:

"There is no God but one." For even if there are so-called gods [in the heavens] ... there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.⁴²

But while Christians can therefore celebrate Matariki (or any other festival) with Christ-centred prayer and

another polarising influence giving some sectors of the community a focal point for push-back against the popularisation of Māori cultural commitment and expression.

Matariki is not alone in being opposed within the community, as the same sectors of the community tend to struggle with the pluralistic, multi-ethnic secularism of contemporary New Zealand. Accordingly, they display similar pushback and even aggression against other cultural manifestations such as Chinese New Year and the Hindu Diwali Festival of Light – pushback that seems to be more aligned to preserving their favoured cultural manifestations, and fear of things different, rather than in promotion of the gospel in the face of an increasingly secular/pagan society.

The revival of Matariki in public can be traced to several factors, including:

1. The increasing assertion of Māori culture as part of New Zealand life;
2. The revival of pagan religious beliefs/practices among Māori at the same time as new concepts of spirituality became pervasive in the wider community, allowing pagan beliefs to be accepted uncritically or even with alacrity;
3. Along with that, the dissolution of any remaining Christian influence in the wider New Zealand culture at the same time as significant sectors of the nominal church largely deserted biblical foundations and gospel ministry;
4. The popular exaltation of indigenous cultures as if indigeneity had greater truth-value or authenticity than more developed cultures (especially colonising ones);
5. The growing political and public acceptance (beginning in the middle of last century) that New Zealand's founding covenant, the Treaty of Waitangi, made protecting Māori,

⁴² 1 Corinthians 8:4-6

promoting their welfare, and preserving their culture a crown duty and a shared opportunity.

So the common observation that Matariki celebrations had not been seen in the past is an observation that would be shared by many non-Māori in the post World War Two generation, and that of their children (although millennials will likely be aware of it through their schooling). Now, everyone is aware of it.

That being said, the promotion of an expressly religious Matariki by state agencies and the media appears to be establishing a State Religion by default. For example, the 2023 publication by the government agency *Te Arawhiti* of a “prayer-book”¹¹ for use in celebrating Matariki is unprecedented in our secular/pluralistic state. Made widely available through government agencies and civic groups promoting Matariki worship and mythology, and distributed to schools by the Ministry of Education, the book contains newly written prayers (called “invocations”) to each of the stars and to the dead (who “have become stars”), to accompany food offerings to Matariki.

Perhaps more confronting is the Ministry of Education’s publication and distribution to schools of its own religious resources specifically for classroom use. Although the law requires all instruction in State Primary Schools to be secular, in 2023 the Ministry’s activity cards for Matariki include prayer to children’s ancestors and to the Matariki stars that children are to learn and recite in class and at home. With the prayers comes a warning that children should pray alongside elders to ensure “correct practices” are followed to guarantee children’s safety as they learn about the “family of light.” This is not only superstitious and pagan: it is illegal in the Ministry of Education’s Primary schools.

¹¹ *Mānawatia a Matariki – Matariki Karakia*

Just as it is possible for Christians to celebrate the first day of January “as special ... to the Lord,”³⁸ so Christians are free to celebrate Matariki in a way that is truly “to the Lord” should they choose to. But “each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.”³⁹ Should anyone be troubled in their conscience about participating in such a celebration, for them it is unclear:⁴⁰ they should not take part.

I’m happy to give a *Rosh Hashanah* greeting to Jewish friends, or on *Chinese New Year* to appropriately greet friends who have a Chinese heritage. I do the latter without attributing to them or myself any engagement with the centuries’ old rites, traditions and myths behind the celebration – paganism that Christians having a Chinese heritage also have nothing to do with, even if some of the non-Christians around them do. There are similar examples we could take from virtually every cultural and ethnic tradition represented in New Zealand.

We need to be careful, too, not to lump all Māori into the same waka (boat). As the Waitangi Tribunal has pointed out, “Māori are not a (sic) homogenous group.” Māori are not all the same, and despite the publicity that declares what “Māori believe” about Matariki, the best that can be said is that “Some Māori believe [whatever] about Matariki.” Even among Māori, traditions (including traditions around Matariki) vary.

Anyone who identifies with an immigrant or ethnic group in New Zealand (or is identified by others as having a particular ethnic connection) will know how wrong – and often how offensive – it is to have particular attitudes, practices or beliefs attributed to them by those who only see skin-colour or only hear different accents. To be Māori is to have Māori heritage⁴¹

³⁸ Romans 14:6

³⁹ Romans 14:5

⁴⁰ Romans 14:14

⁴¹ Just as Jesus was Jewish because he had Jewish ancestry, albeit he also had Gentile tupuna.

celebrate *any* day in ways that make it truly special to the Lord,³¹ we are not free to celebrate it in any way that is not Christ honouring or faithful to the Bible.

Nevertheless, the Bible is rich in recording God-ordained occasional and seasonal celebrations remembering his works and his faithful people of the past,³² giving thanks for God's grace and provision in the present,³³ and looking to God with trusting hope for fulfilment of his promises in the future.³⁴ Such celebrations – including celebrating the New Year³⁵ – were often accompanied with feasting, singing and prayer.

Almost all ethnic observations of a New Year (whenever it occurs) include the elements of thankful remembrance of the past and its people, celebration of the present, and hope for the future. Those should be central elements of Christian daily life,³⁶ as well as on special days or times of Christian celebration – celebration of any particular New Year's Day included.

Most of us in New Zealand greet each other on January 1 with an exclamation of “Happy New Year”³⁷ or similar without associating it with paganism – but its origins are truly pagan! Janus, the false Roman God (appropriately depicted as two-faced) who gave his name to the month of January, was believed to be opening the gate to the future on New Year's Day. I doubt that many people celebrating the New Year on January 1 even know that, let alone engage in Roman pagan worship as they greet each other.

³¹ Romans 14:6

³² Leviticus 23; Hebrews 11

³³ Psalm 106:1

³⁴ 2 Corinthians 4:18; Proverbs 3:5,6

³⁵ Contemporary Jewish culture recognises *Rosh Hashanah* as New Year – Leviticus 23:24

³⁶ Philippians 4:6

³⁷ Always as a “blessing” of course, never as a “wish”!!

Both Christians and non-Christians can attach a spiritual significance to Matariki. But with or without religious connotations, it is recognised by most in much the same way January 1 is recognised as New Year by most of us ... a happy time. Common to all contemporary celebration of Matariki are three key activities, identified in kaupapa and in law:¹²

- Remembering the past and of those who have died;
- Celebrating the present; and
- Looking to/planning for the future.

While the context in which we remember the past, celebrate the present, and plan for the future *can* be a context of traditional Māori mythology, it *can instead* be – and for Christians must be – expressly and exclusively Christ centred.

There is no neutral ground here.¹³ To be Christ's is to have nothing to do with prayers, sacrifices, feasts and ceremonies dedicated to Matariki, whether those are part of traditional tikanga, state innovation, school lessons, or community conformity. Yet what better way at Matariki to celebrate the past, the present and the future than to boldly bring thanksgiving and worship to Christ by whom and for whom all things were created.¹⁴ Now *that* is worth a celebratory feast if you wish.

Every year now, Matariki invites the entire nation to pause and ponder the glory of the stars. Even those who look only at Matariki cannot help but see Matariki's setting: so many stars, so much space, so much glory! On this one occasion every year the whole of New Zealand gets to consider the heavens ... the heavens that declare the glory of God.¹⁵ What a blessing if

¹² Te Ture mō te Hararei Tūmatanui o te Kāhui o Matariki 2022 - Te Kāhui o Matariki Public Holiday Act 2022

¹³ 1 Samuel 7:3; 1 Kings 18:21;

¹⁴ Colossians 1:15-17

¹⁵ Psalm 19:1

considered wisely!¹⁶ That glory, those created stars, make plain to everyone that God alone is God,¹⁷ calling us to come to him.¹⁸

God, who displays his glory in Matariki and the stars, commands all people everywhere to turn to God and worship him,¹⁹ for God has set a day when he will destroy Matariki and the rest of the stars,²⁰ and with justice will judge the world and all those who have exchanged the truth about God for a lie, worshipping and serving Matariki and creation rather than the Creator.²¹

God “has given proof of this to everyone by raising Jesus from the dead.”²² The cluster of Matariki stars in the sky is a reminder of God’s call for all to “believe in the Lord Jesus Christ” for “there is no other name under heaven given by which we must be saved”²³ from the coming judgement.

Matariki cannot save from that judgement, for it too will be destroyed along with all who worship it. But *everyone* who comes to Jesus trusting him alone will be saved.²⁴ Jesus said,

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*²⁵

¹⁶ cf Romans 1:21-23

¹⁷ Romans 1:20

¹⁸ Acts 17:27

¹⁹ Acts 17:30

²⁰ Isaiah 34:4; Revelation 21:21

²¹ Romans 1:25

²² Acts 17:31

²³ Acts 4:12

²⁴ Romans 10:13

²⁵ Matthew 11:28-30 [A “yoke” is a harness enabling or causing one to go the same way as the other, so either being helped or burdened by the partnership.]

2. Matariki for Christians?

Can Christians really take part in Matariki without paganism? We do so with other such celebrations, so why not this? It’s not unusual for Christians to take part in various cultural activities without compromising our faith in Christ. Christians in New Zealand celebrate numerous national days – such as ANZAC Day, King’s Birthday, Labour Day – with varying degrees of engagement in their associated symbolism and related religious and civic ceremonies. Many Christians also celebrate festivals associated with their national or ethnic heritage without engaging in unbiblical practices. Why not!

Well, there could be good reasons why not. We live among unbelievers, many of whom place great significance on pagan religious beliefs and practices integral to their culture and traditions. It is fundamental to our walk with Christ that we serve others before ourselves,²⁶ so that in matters of pagan culture in which we know that “the idols are nothing”²⁷ we must ensure that what we do in our freedom does not put a stumbling block in the way of others who have a tender conscience about such festivities.²⁸

It is also fundamental to being citizens of heaven as disciples of Christ, that we “come out from” anything that obligates us to participate in pagan practices and traditions, or harnesses us to unbelievers in their wickedness. Instead, we are called to “be separate ... touching nothing unclean,”²⁹ saying “No!” to all forms of ungodliness.³⁰ So while we have freedom to

²⁶ Romans 14:7

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 8:4

²⁸ Romans 14:13; 1 Corinthians 8:9-13

²⁹ 2 Corinthians 6:14-17

³⁰ Titus 2:12