

Rangi and Papa

(Time – 6:23)

The Maori people of New Zealand believe that in the very beginning there was nothing but sky and earth. Rangi is the sky, the father of all things. Papa is the earth, the mother of all things. In the very beginning there was nothing but sky, earth and darkness. Rangi and Papa held one another in a tight embrace; sky pressed against earth, earth against sky. They had six sons: Tu, the father of warriors, Tane, the father of forests, Tawhiri, the father of winds and storms, Tangaroa, the father of fish and animals, Haumia, the father of wild food, and Rongo, the father of cultivated food.

The six brothers were pressed so tightly between the bodies of their parents that they could barely move. Then the brothers began to wonder what kind of thing the light might be. They were tired of the dark, narrow space that was their habitation. They started thinking that if they could separate their parents, maybe the light would come. They whispered amongst themselves. The fiercest of them all was Tu, the father of warriors. He spoke first. ‘We will kill them. We will kill them both and rule in their place.’

But Tane, the father of forests, shook his head. ‘No. It would be better to push them apart. That way the sky will be far above us and the earth will be at our feet. The sky will become a stranger to us but the earth, our mother, will always be close.’ This seemed a good idea. All the brothers were in agreement that this was what should be done – all the brothers but one. Tawhiri, the father of winds and storms, did not want his parents to be separated at all. He thought they should be left in peace but the other five ignored him.

First Rongo, the father of cultivated food, tried his strength. He crouched between his father and mother and pushed upwards, but he couldn’t part them. Then it was Tangaroa’s turn. The father of fish heaved and struggled but he wasn’t strong enough. Then Haumia, the father of wild food, tried but sky and earth still clung together. Then Tu, the father of warriors, clenched his teeth and strained to cleave them apart, but he wasn’t strong enough. Last of all, Tane came forward. The father of forests knelt and pressed his forehead and his hands against sky. Slowly, teeteringly he pushed himself to his feet and then he collapsed. The weight was too much for him. He rested for a while and then he tried again, and this time he pressed his head to the ground and rested his feet against his father, the sky. He strained his back and with a mighty effort he tore his parents apart.

They shrieked and groaned. ‘Why are you punishing us? What crime have we committed?’ For a moment he paused and then with a tremendous kick he straightened his legs. With a terrible cry the sky flew up to the place he still inhabits to this day, high above our heads, and ever since that time trees have grown with their heads in the ground and their limbs stretched upwards.

As soon as the sky was torn from the earth, the light came pouring into the space between and out of clefts and caves in the body of the earth, the very first people appeared. But Tawhiri, the father of winds and storms, was angry. He followed his father and made his dwelling place high in the sky and from there he waged war on his brothers. Tangaroa’s children fled in two directions; the fish to the sea and the animals to the land. They’ve been there ever since. Rongo’s children were so frightened they buried themselves in the ground. That’s why farmers still use spades and ploughs to cultivate their food. Haumia, the father of wild food, hid and still we have to search to find his children. Even Tane the forest trembled and was broken in the battles. Tawhiri sent fierce winds, thunderstorms, hurricanes and tempests. Even today the war is not over. Still he hasn’t forgiven his brothers.

The only one who wasn’t afraid was Tu, the father of warriors, and he was so angry with his frightened brothers that he showed these new people how to make nets for fish, how to make spears and traps for animals, how to prepare fields for cultivated food and how to forage for wild food. He showed them how to make axes to fell trees. That way he made sure that his cowardly brothers suffered. And the people, who had emerged from the body of the earth, began to flourish. It is from them that we are all descended.

And Rangi the vast sky still longs for his lost lover the earth. Often in the long nights he weeps for her and his tears falling upon her body are what we people call dew. And often Papa the earth mourns and sighs for the sky. Sometimes we can see her sighs rising from the ground. We call them mists.