



GOD, THE PANDEMIC, AND AN EASTER PASTORAL MESSAGE

This Holy Week will definitely be coloured with mixed feelings and emotions. As a community of faith we fear that the worse is yet to come as coronavirus invades our Pacific shores. Private and public spaces in most countries of the world including the small Pacific island of Guam are already swimming in the tears of vulnerable individuals and families whose loved ones have been lowered to eternity without a farewell kiss and a proper mourning ritual.

Today this pandemic has already silently crept through our windows and doors, walking silently through our bodies and minds, touching on what has become our traditional lifeblood and testing everything that has become the 'correct normal'. The normal community. The normal economy. The normal thinking. The normal theology. Even the normal God. This pandemic has exposed our multiple vulnerabilities, our capacities have been put to the test, and our frailty realized. In fact, our correct normal has in some ways been corrected and reconfigured by what seems to be an invasive force.

As we lower our sail and retrieve our paddles from the rigger of our national canoe this week to honour the Holy Week, we feel that we are caught in what our forebears called "*ua taili le La'i*", a haunting wind of disorientation. *La'i* in Samoa is a wind with varying forces that normally brings heavy squalls, resulting in flooding, agricultural scarcity and sometimes multiple deaths. A *La'i* often presents a liminal space where day appears to be a bright night and night a dark day. A space of tension where we seem to have left the night but have not yet arrived at day. A space that often disorients us economically, culturally, even spiritually. This holy week, with this pandemic disorientation, as Richard Lischer says metaphorically, traps us in one of the haunting and unending Easter Saturdays. This particular Saturday in its traditional pattern is a day set aside for meditation, re-evaluation, and recreation while Jesus sleeps in the tomb. Today we feel that Jesus is stuck in the tomb on Easter Saturday.

On the one hand we feel that the 'old episode' represented by the darkness and violent horrors of the Easter Friday still haunt us with its wounds very fresh that includes the normal human-centric culture that has led to multiple forms of violence and an ecological pandemic of killing and extraction that deliberately disrupt the balance of life. That painful cry of Jesus from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" has become our cry since the pandemic began to claim multiple victims. All we want is for this to be over. To go back to normal. To where we were before. On the

other hand, we feel that we are still not yet arrived at the ‘new episode’, the rising to life represented by the Easter Sunday bringing hope and new life in God.

But as we find ourselves seized by the confusion and uncertainties of this disoriented space, caught in the tensions of pandemic-related winds of life and death, and now the Tropical Cyclone Harold whistling towards other small Pacific islands, pushing us to be out of sync with the normal, we can turn this experience into a positive space where relationality and reconciliation are cultivated. Where Easter Friday and Easter Sunday, death and resurrection, individual and community, economy and ecology, humanity and earth, God and the world, are mutually reconnected and reconciled. In fact, we needed this disoriented space to reassess ourselves and our contribution to the violent horrors and crucifixion of many lives, including the earth, and a liberator named Jesus. A space to bridge and reconnect what we have disconnected through our harmful theologies, development policies, and selfish attitudes.

In this disoriented space, we are offered the following to ponder upon:

First is that God should not be perceived as this almighty violent God who finds pleasure in whipping and punishing this world, killing the innocent victims such as the children of Egypt or the first peoples who dwelled on the so-called Promised Land way before Joshua and his people crossed the Jordan river, or those who have died of this 2019 pandemic. Because God is ‘in’ the world, and God is love, God feels every emotion and tear, suffering with us in every form and every way. Therefore the question is not whether God embraces us in our suffering, but whether we have the faith to recognize the multiple ways that God already reveals his embrace of our suffering. Hence asking the right questions is critical to our search to understand our faith better. Easter reminds us of the story of God who suffered through Jesus not merely to ‘carry our suffering’ as we often claim but really to carry us as we seek to understand our faith through suffering.

Second is that the pandemic should not be perceived as God’s punishment but rather as a plague that calls us into account and to self-assessment as a way of punishing our own selfish and unjust attitudes towards others including God’s creation, holding us responsible of the collateral damage and an ecological pandemic we have released to the world. Coronavirus itself is mainly rooted from an imbalance of God’s creation due to our human thirst for more - more profit, more power. This ‘more is better’ economic paradigm is actually destroying us. But we turn a blind eye because it is often clothed with benefits of power and control. Holy week reminds us of the magnitude of our ingratitude, our unkindness, and our selfish systems, put in place for our own benefit, indirectly hurting and killing others. The same destructive political and economic systems were challenged by Jesus during his time but led to his death. By denying this critical self-assessment whether in a personal level or national level, we add more fuel to pride and self-centred power posing a risk especially to those who are vulnerable and less privileged. In other words, instead of seeing this pandemic as God’s punishment, it

can be seen as a *furnishment* if you like, calling us to refurnish ourselves and the household of God with kindness and justice.

Third is that this pandemic is an invitation to go back to 'neighborly love'. Since our dominant economic system has blinded us of this eternal gift of 'neighborly love', a love that was initially put in place by God as a tool for monitoring harmony and balance of life, this pandemic has disclosed our weakness, that we cannot survive without interdependence and caring for the real face of Jesus living just next door. That 'we live' only because 'we are'. The 'we distance therefore we live' motto of this global pandemic must not compromise the 'we are therefore we live' focus that is well grounded on our life-affirming cultural and biblical values. Like what poet Shiva Prakash said in her poem *Let Me Touch You Today*, "like the sunlight touching the garden without touching, like stars touching each other without touching, like songs touching the ear without touching, like compassion touching the heart without touching" we need deep emotional and spiritual touching and connections in a time physical and social distancing seem to dictate relationships. Learning from the Early Church communities of the bible, despite that they have very few resources during disoriented times of persecution, but because of their faith in 'The Way' (Jesus) and their deep 'relational ways' of bonding and spiritual touching, a 'yes way' was normally found in what seems to be 'no way'. Day by day they grew in love and goodwill by breaking bread together, sharing food, selling their possessions, and distributing the proceeds to those who need them most (Acts 2:44-47). 'Neighborly love' is the generational fixer. It invites us to the realm of deep care in order for us to care deeply. The events of the holy week expose the fragile state of small communities such as Early church being crucified in many levels by the empires and cultures that silence, but they also expose how God is very much part of their fragile experiences and vulnerability.

Fourth is that in any *La'i* disoriented moments, the bible comes to our rescue. But as we find sanctuary in the one holy book that matters to all Christians, we must be careful of approaching this pandemic with careless and irresponsible literal interpretations where biblical passages are ripped out of their contexts to satisfy personal uncritical theologies and to justify a God that excludes and discriminates. We must remember that throughout history, the same bible was used as a tool by colonizers, who declared themselves to be true Christians, to justify racism, the destruction of many cultures, the violence against men, women and children, the wiping out of the economy of sharing in favour of the economy of the one, the killing of many indigenous people, and the taking by force of many lands and resources all in the name of a God who was presented a powerful imperial divine monarch. Our moments of disorientation invite us to treat the bible with prayerful reflection and deep care, with utmost vigilance so that it is not weaponized to suit our killer and selfish instincts. The holy week reminds us that during Jesus' moments of disorientation at the garden of Gethsemane for example, he re-evaluates his faith in his Father with deep care and prayerful wisdom. And from that Jesus was able to correct Peter of his violent vengeance (John 18:10-11). The Easter story corrects our theologies of God who finds pleasure in whipping, and punishing the

world. In fact, the events of the holy week expose us humans as the violent ones. The ones who find pleasure in whipping, punishment, and crucifying innocent lives. Who like to use God to justify our human vengeance.

And finally is that while we might complain of having less food at home, or small spaces to store groceries, or limited freedom to go shopping, to walk to the park, to drive to town, or to eat at our favourite fast food restaurant, we need to remember that there are millions of people around the world even in our own local communities who do not have the luxury that we have. This pandemic provides us with the opportunity to dare to remember. Remembering to be grateful and celebrate what we already have as a gift from God. Remembering that as we now find ourselves vulnerable, we need to take this experience as a force to drive for love. This love can be actioned through prayers. It can be actioned through our recognition that others might be in desperate need compared to us. It can also be actioned through giving up the very thing that we love the most in order to benefit our neighbour in need. We see this in the events of the holy week, when “a man carrying a jar of water” gave up his “larger upper room” for the Passover meal (Lk.22:10-12). When a man named Joseph gave up his tomb in “which no one had yet been laid” to the dying Saviour (Lk.23:50-53). And when a stranger, namely Jesus, on the road to Emmaus gave up his time to offer two young men a meal to be remembered (Lk.24:13-35).

As we walk in the path of Jesus throughout this holy week, seeking to find answers to the questions posed by our disoriented pandemic experiences, we are reminded that after every “*ua taili le La’i*” comes the moment “*ua alii le matagi*”, a gentle healing wind of hope. And for that we are reminded that hope is not defined by some mysterious heavenly escape from suffering, but rather by the multiple resilient stories that defied the odds of suffering. Hope is when we realize that God does not work through some gigantic dictatorial way offered by the empires to fix the mess we have created, or others have created for us, but rather through us being able to navigate in faith and in trust the multiple options already available before us to use as tools of resilience and liberation, including having the faith to hear the ‘small voice’ of God (1 Kings 19:12) wrapped in small stories, small practices of solidarity, a small cross, a small tomb, and a small community whose only hope is each other. In other words, the ‘new life’ and ‘new creation’ promised by the events of the cross, death, and resurrection implies a radical new consciousness, a new vision made possible by the very small relational ways many of us have neglected, such as love and kindness.

May your holy week be filled with the wisdom of Jesus’ cross, the peace of his tomb, and the hope of his resurrection. God bless.

Upolu Luma Vaai
07 April, 2020
Suva, Fiji Islands