

REFLECTION, 2 July 2023

“On the road again”

By Rev. Dr. Fei Taule’ale’ausumai

‘Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

Yesterday I had been putting off going to the Accident and Emergency Department with a complaint I was having all week. So finally, I tottered off to the A & E in Lower Hutt. On arrival they took my details etc. then they asked if I was a patient of Hutt City Health Centre to which I replied yes. She then apologised and said, we can’t see any patients from HCUC and handed me a piece of paper explaining why. She said, go to Newtown or the Hospital Emergency Department. That was not the type of non-welcome I was expecting at all. I read the piece of paper she gave me and apparently Hutt City Health Centre doctors no longer wished to be part of the roster for A & E and as a result their patients are no longer welcome. I was not in the right state to drive all the way over to Newtown and I figured I’ll just go to the chemist to get through the weekend. It was not a welcoming clinic.

The special character of this church St. Andrew’s on the Terrace is that it is a welcoming church, it is a Progressive, inclusive, rainbow church. The PCANZ is in the process of electing a Moderator Designate for the 2025 General Assembly, so I was looking at a YouTube video of one of the 3 candidates for Moderator Designate of the PCANZ and he talks about the false gospels being, liberalism, inclusivism, progressive Christianity and socialism. God help us if he gets elected. It may interest you to know that I am also one of the 3 candidates for Moderator Designate for the 2025 General Assembly. The other two male candidates I believe are both from Affirm the right-wing Evangelical group. Our profiles went out on Monday to all the churches throughout the country and the sad thing about this is that my profile

was halved, it read like a cv, all the ministries I've been in but nothing of my work with the National Church. Of course, the two men's profile had all the correct information. I have felt very unjustly treated this week. St. Luke's Remuera who nominated me did take issue with Northern Presbytery and Head office. My half profile had even had my signature attached to it suggesting that it had my approval. I'm told that this was an administrative error. Head office are seeking to rectify this on Monday by sending out my original profile stating that it was an administrative error. Never before has the church had a Pacific Island woman candidate in the running for Moderator Designate and this is how I'm treated. The race has just started, and it is an uneven playing field for me.

But what does this say about "welcome"? I have felt like a sheep amongst wolves this week, do any of you know what I'm talking about? The literal imagery is quite frightening. When I put this into my own daily context I imagine my poor dogs Peanut and Snoopy among a pack of bull mastiff and pit-bull terriers. Peanut in particular would not stand a chance and would be pulverised in seconds.

A few years ago when I had my dog Bailey a little Sydney Silkie terrier, I went to take my car in for a service Bailey and I were changing from my car to the courtesy car when the owners pit-bull terrier raced up and attacked Bailey, thank God I had him on the leash and yanked him up quickly that the Pit bull's teeth did not get time to sink in very deep or lock its jaws. Bailey came away bitten and scratched but survived. I took him to the vet and then went and gave the vet bill to the mechanic to pay, with photos of the damage that was done to Bailey, the mechanic did not dare argue with me. When we are sent to those who judge and condemn you because of your sexuality, theology and belief then we shake the dust off our feet and walk away.

As you are already aware I consider myself a Lukan Nazareth manifesto missionary. I do not feel an urgency to take it to all nations, to the ends of the earth in a desire to Christianise the whole world. I see my mission as one which empowers and liberates here in my community. Christ's mission is about being the face of Christ where there is pain and distress, hurt, tragedy and well as celebration and rejoicing. Mission Christ's way means we go, and we do and we give without placing conditions on our giving as opposed to proselytism, I will feed you if you accept Jesus as your Lord and Saviour; of course a hungry person is going to convert. Why do we feel the need for instant conversion responses, surely our job is to plant the seed and feed them because they are hungry and not because they are Christian!

It is very likely that Jesus instructed his disciples to copy his own pattern of activity. That entailed travel. He would come to a town or settlement and would need to find a place to sleep and be looked after. The pattern he sets out for the disciples insists that they travel as poor people, but, unlike the wandering Cynic teachers of his day, not even to carry a begging bag. A Franciscan brother who was chaplain at Auckland University with me in told me about the origin of the Monks hood when we were marching in a graduation ceremony. He said that the reason brothers wore hoods was so that the rich people could throw their coins in to the hood and the poor people could also help themselves to the contents as the brothers walked by. It is interesting though to note that as the years progressed the hoods got deeper and deeper so that money could be thrown in, but little could be taken out. Hmm I wonder what that says about the church and its mission to the poor.

Apparently at the time these sorts of missions began the larger Palestinian houses that the disciples would pass were such that you could freely enter the front half of the house from outside - it was public space. These disciples would then face the owners with the choice of being part of their mission by offering hospitality and enjoying its benefits through healing and teaching or of

turning away these uninvited would-be guests. I know in Samoa in the days when my grandfather tramped the island of Savaii on foot as a school inspector visiting all the schools on the island he would stop at whatever village at days end and be offered a bed and hospitality. It was not an uncommon sight, villagers used to travel for miles in the old days by foot and had to pass other villages along the way and sought food and resting at days end.

It was accepted that enemies should not be offered hospitality, but were these enemies or friends? They claimed to be messengers of peace and wholeness, including healing. They claimed to be announcing the reign of God and by their actions bringing its reality into life in the here and now. To receive them was to receive the one who sent them and to receive him was to receive God. To reject someone who is not an enemy, to refuse to offer hospitality, was shameful. It brought disgrace and promised misfortune. That is the expectation here, too. Reject these messengers and you reject Jesus; reject Jesus and you reject God; reject God and you invite judgement. Shaking the dust off the feet is probably symbolic of such judgement. I wonder how many of us can turn away people on our doorstep asking for hospitality? How many situations have you been in where you felt you needed to shake the dust off your feet and turn your back on certain relationships?

The disciples knew what their strategy was, the alternative of dropping in on friends on the way to say, 'Hello', was not an option. It would have thwarted the plan. The approach was quite confrontational because it put the people in a position of choice, to assist or to reject.

In the carrying out of their mission, the disciples are rejected by some but received by others. In the welcoming process, a connection is forged between the hosts (whoever welcomes you) disciples, Jesus, and God. A new family is created of those who faithfully carry out the mission and those who openly receive the mission and a fellowship is established. The new family is born in the context of mission. The community on the road is the community needing

to be welcomed and needing to receive a cup of cold water. Maybe hospitality to God's messengers carries its own reward; maybe the new fellowship that emerges is the reward. In any case, the notion of reward suggests that the act of welcoming does not go unnoticed by God. God is intimately involved in the mission, both in sustaining the messengers and in rewarding those showing hospitality.

At the end of the day God's mission is to the world *Missio Dei* if the church was to die tomorrow, God's mission to the world would still continue because its mission is to the world in spite of the church. Amen.