

REFLECTION 25th February 2024*“What is your Cross?”**By Rev. Dr. Fei Taule’ale’ausumai*

As we continue our Lenten journey our Gospel reading challenges us to take up our cross and follow Jesus. When we imagine Jesus carrying the weight of a heavy wooden cross along the Via Dolores road and we are being challenged to take up our cross. Have you ever stopped to consider for yourself what is your Cross? What heavy weight are you carrying around with you? is its weight too much to bear? Is there anyone around you to help carry the load? As you know from my E News this week I had quite a cross to bear with my little dog Peanut getting sick and dying. I know that if you are not an animal person you will find it hard to comprehend or understand grief surrounding the loss of an animal. Some might say “it’s just a dog?” When my first dog Bailey died and I was in Fiji, I was beside myself with grief and I wanted to go home and bury him in my back yard. One of my conference participants a pakeha woman from the Congregational Union of NZ church looked at me disapprovingly and said, “can’t someone else do that?” At the time my husband was in a private hospital suffering from a stroke and I did not expect him to help me. She was so insensitive I had to walk away in case I said something I regretted, and I was not in the right frame of mind to bother with such an ignorant person. An appropriate response would have been “get behind me satan”. My colleague who also experienced his dog getting ill while he was away said to me, Fei go home, I’ve got this. Some of us have illnesses and disease to bear, every day is a struggle, some of us have broken relationships with our family, some of us carry burdens that no one knows about, it's private. What is your cross?

When I was a student at Knox in 1988, I did my summer training at St. Andrew's Presbyterian church in Levin. On the week that the minister went away on holiday I had to do a funeral on my own. This was a funeral for a man who happened to be walking along the riverbank. Within minutes he died saving two children from drowning. His heroism was a selfless act of love and commitment that resulted in him giving his life for these two children. He saw a need and he acted on it. Whether he knew that he would die in the process is unknown. In here lies the simplicity of the Christian message for this season of Lent. He forgot himself in the process of saving others.

“If anyone wants to come with me, they must forget self carry their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their own life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it”. This is not an invitation to death as such but an invitation to compassion and selflessness not to the extent of personal neglect and abandonment but to the point of understanding the urgency and importance of living out the Gospel imperative. Two words that might sum up this Gospel imperative is perhaps, see and act, regardless of what impact this may have on yourself at this point in time.

Peter had a very clear idea as to what he thought Jesus' ought to be like. Peter expected Jesus to be a hero. After all, Peter had seen how Jesus healed the sick and fed the hungry. The crowds following Jesus were increasing; he became more and more popular every day. But now, Jesus seemed to have let the side down, as far as Peter was concerned. At the peak of his career, he begins talking about his death and challenging them to follow him. This irritates Peter who takes Jesus aside and is literally saying “hey this is not a good advertisement for us, we are onto a good thing here, no one wants to hear of you being arrested and killed. What Peter sees and what

Jesus sees are two different causes. Jesus is happy with the title the “Son of Man” but wants the identity of him as “Messiah” kept secret. Why do you give in so tamely? Is Peter’s real cry?

At this point Jesus recognises the very same test that came to him in the wilderness when Satan tempted him. “Get behind me Satan” he says to Peter. But after Jesus says, “get behind me Satan” he offers the challenge to all to follow him in denying self, taking up the cross and following him. Jesus must at all costs fight the idea that victory is by the kind of Messiahship which the general public want. He wants his disciples to recognise their roles as a commitment that requires them to be loyal even to the length of death. By taking up their cross they must accept their leader along this road, not along the other.

Self-denial, perhaps another word for this is altruism in which one spends their whole life meeting the needs of others that their own are never met. This is traditional Christian theology where we are mere vessels through which the Gospel is lived and acted out. We can easily become invisible robots or vehicles that fulfil the mission of Christ to the - “here’s the ambiguity” - to the detriment of the self or to the perceived work of God. I believe that God does not think that we should deny our own basic human needs. I think some ministers and myself included, are often the last to heed the call to self-care because we believe that it is our duty to be on all 24/7 to be available when others need us most. That’s the traditional model, but thanks to answer phones which many people hate using and mobile phones we have a little bit more flexibility to our daily schedules.

When Jesus tells us to take up our cross, we need to be clear about a couple of things. First off, he’s not merely telling us to put up with the ordinary burdens that we face in life, everyday niggles and aches and pains that confront us when we wake up in the

morning till when we go to sleep at night. These for some of us may not “crosses to bear”. However, I also know for some of us just being able to get on with the simple basic things in life can be a burden. It is also not about putting up with violence and abuse in our homes and society, this is not a cross that we have to bear. When Jesus tells us to take up the cross, he’s not telling us to put up with the minor annoyances that come into our lives each day. It is a challenge to us to experience that self-emptying that Jesus experienced on the cross. The Greek word for this is *kenosis* meaning self-emptying. What does self-emptying mean? It is heart and soul stuff, its about believing and giving all because it is a part of who you are, it is not a doctrine or an expectation. At the end of the day *Kenosis* from the perspective of the cross is ultimately about passion.

The Lenten season takes us on a journey through the passion narratives of Jesus through to the cross and the resurrection. For us, a *kenotic* mission is a passionate mission, one that drives us to live out the Gospel imperative from a place of justice, honesty, integrity and compassion within ourselves. Seeing and acting.

The vulnerability and the struggle that comes out of the passion and the pain of the cross challenges us to consider the most vulnerable people to whom we are called to be alongside (compassion), to break the silences and give voice to the voiceless. Likewise, in reflecting on the Gospel and culture we also have to name its harmful aspects. Aspects that deny people their rights because of a purported providential Gospel that suggests that the rich are rich because they are blessed therefore the poor are poor because they are cursed. We do not see the wholeness of the Gospel of the Cross if we allow ourselves to hear only the happy stories of our own experiences and not the painful stories of other people’s real and lived realities.

For us as Christians the birth of Christ into the world became for us “Emmanuel” God with us, God is present in our lives.

This mystery whom we call God is engaged with humanity. We are not witnesses to a God who set the world going in the distant past and left us to our own devices. We, individually, and collectively are witnesses to a God who loves us, communicates with us, and willingly brings us into relationships. This relationship, though demanding, is full of promise. How do we respond to the demands of relationship with God, through our lived relationship with one another, by living with justice, humility, integrity, compassion, honesty?

“If anyone wants to come with me, they must forget self carry their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his own life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it”. SAOTT is a community of people who want to help pick up your cross your burden and make your burden easier to bear. We are the hands and feet of Jesus and during this Lenten season, we are journeying together and helping to carry one another’s crosses. Amen.