

## **REFLECTION 10<sup>TH</sup> MAY “I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU ORPHANED”**

**By Rev Dr Fei Taule’ale’ausumai**

Talofa lava, kia ora, and welcome to our online listeners and viewers.

“Oh my gosh, I didn’t realise it was Mother’s Day today until Friday after I had already published E News”. And yet perhaps, without even planning it the theme “I will not leave you orphaned” seems most appropriate to also celebrate our mothers and the significant women in our lives and her today.

Mother’s Day arrives differently for each of us. For some, it is filled with joy, celebration, flowers, breakfast tables, laughter, and gratitude. For others, it arrives with absence. With grief. With memories. With longing. With complicated relationships. With silence where once there was conversation.

Forgive me if today’s reflection might sound like a cathartic exercise for my own unexpressed grief but it may also speak to some of you of your own unexpressed grief even if it was many years ago where you experienced the loss of your loved ones. Within the last month our dear friend Judith Trotter passed away and fortunately I was able to visit her on my way to the airport and send her on her way in my own unique way. Then Aunty Tili passed away on 23<sup>rd</sup> April and just recently a very dear friend and world renown Theologian Prof. Rev. Dr Jione Havea passed away aged 60. We travelled to Cuba together and around the Pacific and wrote journals together. The whole world is mourning his passing. His farewell was on Saturday but I believe his burial will be tomorrow in Sydney Australia.

When my aunty Tili passed away my younger sister Helen asked me in Vietnam for a word that described how I was feeling. And that word for me was “bereft”. Even though my mum died in November 2020, my aunty Tili had also been like a second mum to me and when she died I felt bereft of everything. She had mentored me into ministry, to completing my Ph.D. to mentoring me to staying here at St. Andrew’s when I was feeling a little vulnerable in the early days and then reconfirming this calling at my birthday and commemoration of 35 years of ordination on the 1<sup>st</sup> March this year.

And so as I reflected on the words from John's Gospel today, "I will not leave you orphaned" I also found myself thinking of my dear Aunt Tili, she had well over more than 60 years in education. In her life time of teaching she never once expelled or suspended a single student. The fact that Samoa wanted to farewell her with a State funeral spoke volumes of her reputation and love in Samoa she could aptly be called the Mother Theresa of Education.

At her funeral, person after person stood to tell stories of arriving at school unable to pay their fees. In many places, those children would have been sent home in shame. But Auntie Tili refused to leave children feeling discarded or unwanted. Instead, she would send them out into the school grounds to rake leaves, cut grass, clean pathways, or help around the campus. And when they returned and told her the work was completed, she would simply say: "Go home and tell your parents your fees are paid in full." What an extraordinary act of dignity. She understood something profoundly human and profoundly spiritual: that every child deserves belonging, every child deserves hope, and every child deserves someone who believes in them. She was a trailblazer, a pioneer, and an inspiration. But perhaps more importantly, she became a mother to generations of students throughout Samoa and beyond.

And even after retirement, the nation still called upon her wisdom. She was brought back into public service as a Commissioner for Labour and Unions because her leadership and integrity were still needed. It was only after her cancer diagnosis that she finally stepped away from public life.

Over the last 13 months, she spent time here in Aotearoa New Zealand seeking treatment. When the NZ government were finally made to recognise Samoan citizens born before 1948 as NZ citizens her and her husband fell into that category. And fortunately she was able to come to NZ to seek health treatment as a NZ citizen. Sadly, after a few months there were no further medical options available. Yet even in her frailty, she carried herself with grace, humour, gentleness, and dignity.

And we at St Andrew's on The Terrace were fortunate enough to meet her, to hear her speak, and to experience her quiet presence among us.

For me personally, it was a deep honour that she was present at my 65th birthday celebrations and at the marking of my 35 years of ordination. Those memories now feel even more precious.

I remember standing to speak at my own mother's funeral in November 2020. One by one, my siblings stood with their partners and children beside them. And then it came time for me to stand. I stood there alone my husband Rewi died in 2015. And the first words that came out of my mouth were: "I am now officially an orphan." Even as I said the words aloud, they hit me with a force I was not prepared for. Because my mother and I shared so much life together. I lived next door to her. We shared meals almost every day. In the latter years of her life, we became more than mother and daughter. We became companions and best friends.

We went shopping together. We had our nails done together. We spoiled one another in little ways.

Whenever I travelled overseas, I rarely bought gifts for anyone else. But I would always search for something special for my mother. Something beautiful. Something thoughtful. Something she would treasure because it came from me. And after she died, one of the unexpected griefs was travelling overseas and realising there was no longer anyone to buy that special gift for. It is strange the things that break our hearts.

Sometimes grief arrives not only in the great dramatic moments, but in the quiet rituals of love that suddenly disappear. And I am sure many of you this morning carry your own stories and memories of mothers, grandmothers, aunts, mentors, teachers, and significant mother figures who shaped your lives.

Some of those memories will bring smiles. Some may bring tears. Some may still carry unresolved pain. But all of them remind us how deeply human beings long to love and to be loved.

And perhaps that is the sacred thread connecting all these stories together today. The love of mothers. The love of aunts. The love of teachers. The love of those who nurture and guide and protect. The love that says: You matter. You belong. You are not alone.

The Bible itself is filled with women who mothered not only children, but communities, movements, and hope itself. Mary carried Jesus through danger and uncertainty, fleeing violence and standing faithfully at the foot of the cross.

Naomi discovered that family could be rebuilt through love and loyalty after devastating loss. Jochebed the mother of Moses protected her child from violence and trusted life into uncertain waters.

Ruth refused to abandon someone she loved and chose faithfulness over self-preservation. Tabitha clothed the poor and cared for widows through practical acts of compassion. Lydia opened her home and created sanctuary for the early church community.

For me motherhood is not only about giving birth. Motherhood is about making space for others to flourish. Protecting dignity. Feeding hope. Standing beside the vulnerable. Refusing to abandon people when life becomes difficult. That being true, then our world has been shaped by many mothers, aunties, teachers, mentors, and caregivers whose names may never appear in scripture, but whose love carries the very spirit of God.

Auntie Tili belonged to that long tradition of women who made sure others were not left orphaned by life. And perhaps that is what Jesus was speaking about all along.

Not merely the absence of physical abandonment, but the promise that love itself would continue through human relationships, through community, through compassion, through the Spirit alive within us.

“I will not leave you orphaned.”

What if those words are also a calling for the church? What if our task as followers of Jesus is to create communities where nobody feels abandoned? Where nobody feels disposable? Where nobody is shamed because they are poor? Where nobody is excluded because they cannot keep up? Where grief is honoured? Where vulnerability is safe? Where people know they belong?

Because perhaps one of the most spiritual things we can do in this life is to ensure that nobody leaves our presence feeling orphaned. And perhaps that is the legacy left behind by women like my mother. Women like Auntie Tili. Women whose love shaped lives quietly and profoundly.

Long after their voices have fallen silent, their compassion continues to live on in us. And that, I think, is one of the ways resurrection happens in ordinary human life. Amen.