

## JUSTICE AND PEACE IN THE WOMB OF THE PACIFIC

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*Ilaitia Tuwere draws on the Polynesian word vanua, meaning the womb of the land nurturing people in a living environment, to explore in a distinctly Pacific way the theme of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC).*

*This paper was first presented at the JPIC consultation in Malua, Western Samoa in September, 1988.\**

One morning in September, my nine year old daughter, Lois, was awakened by the crying of our cat outside. This crying was rather unusual and it must have concerned Lois who was still in bed. She came out and looked around. I carelessly said from the kitchen that pusi was crying because she was due to have kittens. Lois straight away went about preparing a decent place for pusi and finally ended up by placing her safely in her clothing cupboard. She locked the door of her own room and was alone with pusi during those creative moments while pusi was giving birth. Even I wasn't allowed inside despite my repeated knocks. Lois had locked herself in her room. The closet was securely fastened with pusi inside. Obviously my daughter did not like us, especially my eldest son who has little liking for pusi, to know of the incident. As if in pain, Lois was crying, telling us not to disturb the creative event. When my son forcefully made his way into the room, Lois in her own maternal agony cried out, "I don't want anyone. Pusi is still giving birth." I had to order my son out. When Lois went to school and pusi was safe inside the closet, a letter was left outside for Loata to see:

Dear Loata,

I have gone to school. Pusi is in the cupboard. She has babies but if she hasn't got any babies do not open the cupboard please, but you can open it if you hear the babies cry.

From,

Lois or Ciri.

If Pusi tries to go out, let it be.

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The after-thought, "if pusi tries to go out, let it be", is quite arresting. It helped me to put down something in writing for the JPIC Conference in Malua. Let it be, yes, let it be. Let it grow. Let it move. Let it be born. Give it freedom and blessing. In his long poem on **The Universal Love : Let it be**, Bernard Narokobi of Papua New Guinea has this to say and I quote the following verses:

Let it be that what is treasured is life  
That what matters now is each person  
And that alone or with others  
We shall work for its noblest calling.

Let it be that each moment of the day  
From the depths of remorse  
To the green valleys of happiness  
Be offered as life's precious gift  
That each day shall be  
A life's gift of wondrous beauty.

Let it be that each person is special  
That man shall laugh and cry  
And let that greet you through your doors  
And the windows that are open  
Hearing each person's call  
As a tune to follow to the mountain top  
And breathe its fresh air of hope.

Let it be that  
For our native land  
The river shall have a right to flow  
The tree shall be free to grow  
And the grass shall long to be green  
Just as men shall long to love  
Life and people far above  
Laws, religions and decrees.<sup>1</sup>

The subject to be addressed, "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation" is a huge one. Who could do it justice in so short a space? It is important that we look at the relation between justice and peace on the one hand and the integrity of creation on the other in proper perspective. The

former have long been discussed and used in the history of the ecumenical movement. Concern for the integrity of creation came out very forcefully at the Sixth Assembly in Vancouver, in 1983. I hold the view that justice and peace are dynamics that by their very nature are to protect the integrity of creation; creation in its entirety including people, plants and creatures. And creation and its integrity ultimately means community, the community of love where God reigns as its Supreme Lord.

Justice and peace become abstract terms when removed from creation and the battle for its fulfilment and completeness. They can be over-used and suffer the problem of inflation. And like all inflation, it may lead on to devaluation. It is for this reason that I have chosen to treat the subject under the title: "Justice and Peace in the Womb of the Pacific". The symbol of the Pacific as a 'womb' is not new. In a good number of Pacific languages, the word 'womb' is also used for 'land'. The best examples are - *fanua* (Samoa), *fonua* (Tonga), *fenua* (Maohi Nui or Tahiti). Parallel words in other parts are *vanua* (Fiji) and *lau fanua* (Tuvalu). They share one commonality and refer to mountains, rivers, valleys, plants, trees and practically everything on the face of the earth including soil or the earth itself. But they also point beyond these material things to refer to people, identity, customs, traditions, ancestors, beliefs and values. *Fanua* or womb covers all these things. The land and the sea are indivisible; they form one reality. Sharing his view on this at a conference held in Suva, Dr Toa Finau, a lecturer at the Pacific Theological College in Suva, had this to say:

Our ancestors assumed that the sea was an integral part of their land. They were indivisible. They were one. Their sense of the nature-given right to ownership of the land was the same with the sea. They had a sense of belongingness to both..... They believed that the sea was the mother of the land.....

The fact that the land and sea are related to the mother's womb explains why Pacific people have such strong and deep attachment to both. God has entrusted new human life nowhere but in the depths of a woman's womb.

In the light of what has been said so far, it seems that the term 'ecumenism' needs to be defined anew at this point of time. The word comes from 'oikoumene' which is (again) the feminine passive participle of the verb 'oikeo' - to inhabit, dwell, reside. Oikoumene has always referred to people, so it means human dwelling, human society, human structures as

they spread over the earth. In the Pacific, ecumenism should intentionally and visibly include all the other things in our social locations; social locations that shape our consciousness. Our inhabited earth is the world of small islands and sea, not big continents. Our relation to the sea, land, rivers and mountains shapes our communities and village life. The New Testament negative view of the sea in Revelation, "and the sea was no more" (21) is not only a theological vision of St John but also an ideological statement. Ecumenism must be about real history and not only the history of salvation. It must be concerned with fish, reef, corals, lagoons, sea-bed, and take interest in the legends and myths related to the sea and the land. This renewed concern for the integrity of creation has vast ecclesiological implications. The call is made to the churches in the Pacific for renewal and change so that they widen their scope of commitment and service. There is a real need for churches to actively participate with others in keeping the region free from all kinds of attempts to pollute and destroy our ocean, for the Pacific is our mother in whose womb we find our home; our *koro, kolo* or *alalafaga*. We are to cooperate with God for we are called to be 'God's fellow workers' (1 Cor. 3:9). The very salvation of man implies reconciliation and transfiguration of the entire natural environment around. It means liberation from the bondage to decay, an ascension into the glorious liberty of the children of God (Rom. 8:21).

In Christ we find the purpose of the world and the integrity of humankind. In St Paul's epistle particularly Colossians and Ephesians, the image of Christ the head of the Church and the Church as the body of Christ is transferred to the redemption of the world. Christ will become the head of the universe and the universe will become his body. The union of the two is the work of God. Christ intercedes for it to the Father before his very own person. He becomes the true embodiment of the one single, unique human being, the cosmic Adam in whom the whole universe is summed up and united. The relationship between Christ and the Church is also compared with the relationship between husband and wife (Eph. 5). If in his redeeming work Christ becomes the head of the universe then the church in a sacramental sense already is the mother of the universe here and now. And Mary the virgin Mother of God becomes its symbol. The Church today should recapture this New Testament Christology and allow herself to be immersed in it. The world now is a different world. The symbol of 'motherhood' is replaced by the new symbol of 'sexual partner'. The environment is exploited, raped, robbed and abused. Present indications show that humanity is in deep trouble. The Pacific is no longer the peaceful virgin Pacific as it used to be, although the wholesome and harmonious

community of people and nature remains undisturbed in many parts of the region. What do we do as churches? Is God concerned with the real world around us? What sort of god is he that does everything for human salvation but clearly has nothing at all to do with people in their life situation: their vanua? Is God creator or not? If he is as we confess him to be in the very first statement of the Creed, what difference should this make in our life in the Pacific now?

Both the Gospel and our Pacific cultures show that the vanua is 'home' and is our mother. That the 'womb of the Pacific' is a symbol that points to the community; the community of love. Never has there been a time like the present period when we have been drawn so closely together in the region; a time in our history when we in a very real sense become one vanua both historically and ideologically; a time when so much attention by the superpowers is turned on us. What happens in one island can no longer be ignored by others. Events that happen in Kanaky or Maohi Nui or Fiji affect us all, for we belong to the same body, the same womb. Denial of justice and peace in one area is the denial of the same in other areas. But there is a new sense of community that is growing, a quest for regional identity. The Pacific people are not only entitled to, but obliged to be actively involved to the fullest possible extent in shaping their own future. I am not as yet able to properly and clearly articulate the nature of this growing consciousness but different forces have rallied together to make this possible. This new consciousness is in itself healthy and good especially when judged in the light of our past as well as present colonial history. It of course places enormous responsibilities on the Churches that work together in the PCC at all levels, regional, national and local. Enormous because this new consciousness can be harnessed or used for responsible stewardship over creation and for assisting the Church in mission; it could also become a divisive and even a destructive force in the region. We cannot afford to have that at this point of time.

The Church through the redemptive work of Christ has been called to become the mother of this Pacific fenua whose head is Christ. Of course it cannot be just any mother. It has to become a Pacific mother who knows the ways of the life of the islands, willing to understand their people, their cries, joys, dreams and hopes. As the body of Christ, she internalises the womb of the Pacific which is constantly

....groaning in travail together until now....  
as we wait for adoption of sons (and daughters),  
the redemption of our bodies (Rom. 8:22 ff RSV).

Some observers say that developments in the Pacific both now and in the future, particularly how the world responds to them, will in a real way decide the shape of things to come in the twentyfirst century. Growing militarism in the region is definitely one that requires serious attention. Plans to use the sea as dumping ground for nuclear waste is another. These are not new issues to the Pacific Conference of Churches. How seriously are we taking them now? The great mass of water that we have is both a divine gift and a responsibility. It raises the twin concern for our own survival as people of small islands and concern for the wholeness of creation. We may not have the gift to properly define and articulate what justice and peace mean for the present world but we have the great gift of the sea and our precious islands to look after. In 'he midst of present and coming turmoil and apparent vulnerability of the Pacific Islands; the Church should continue to joyfully sing its maternal song through Mary's song, the Magnificat.

My heart praises the Lord;  
my soul is glad because God my Saviour,  
for he has remembered me, his lowly servant!  
From now on all people will call me happy,  
because of the great things  
the Mighty God has done for me.  
His name is holy;  
from one generation to another  
he shows mercy to those who honour him.  
He has stretched out his mighty arm  
and scattered the proud with all their plans.  
He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away with empty hands.  
He has kept the promise to our ancestors,  
and has come to the help of his servant Israel.  
He has remembered to show mercy to Abraham  
and all his descendants forever!  
(Luke 1:46-55 TEV)

Justice and peace presuppose community and the right relationship within it. The song of Mary is clearly biased toward the lowly, the poor and the marginalised. The Lord fills the hungry with good things and he sends the

rich away with empty hands. He scatters the proud with all their plans. Who are the poor and powerless in the Pacific today? Who are the mighty, economically, politically and ecclesiastically? How can we as Pacific Churches live with this song of Mary programmatically? Can we say that our own Church is one of these mighty kings? In a very real way, Mary's song turns our values upside down and invites us to long for a new Oceania where the old is not thrown out but opened up for new possibilities. The coming into being of the new Oceania cannot be achieved by human beings. All of this is God's work, not ours. We can only receive it as a gift from God according to his reign. But what he gives us as a gift is also our responsibility. We battle therefore for a new Pacific where peace may reign. According to Dr Philip Potter, peace or shalom refers to:

entirety, totality, wholeness . It is the undisturbed freedom of life and movement, the unchecked growth and the expansion of the self - shalom prevails in those who are united in acting together for the common good; it represents the Hebrew conception of history as harmonious community. Far more than the absence of war, it indicates the state in which all human beings and all things are able to be and fulfil themselves unchecked and undisturbed.<sup>3</sup>

But peace can only be true peace when it is the fruit of justice (Isaiah 32:15-17). To be just is to allow God's righteousness to govern our lives. Again Philip Potter says that:

Righteousness, *tsedeq*, comes from a Semitic root which means to be straight, firm, steel-like, as opposed to evil, *rasha*, to loose or slack, to ignore or forget. To be just is to be straight, right, attentive, acting according to one's inner being, having integrity of character. <sup>4</sup>

It becomes imperative therefore on the part of the Churches to translate what the *fanua* as affirmed by the Gospel is saying with regard to the integrity and wholeness of creation, into effective programmes at all levels. Growing together towards that community of love through justice and peace should be allowed to infiltrate all programmes of PCC member Churches. The option of whether or not we should do this is no longer open to us now. It must be allowed to become not only a programme but a movement within the Church, filtering into what we normally do with young people, women's meetings and fellowship, Bible studies, seminars and workshops.

In Isaiah 11:1-9, the prophet in his vision sees the harmonious community of people and nature. Its coming into being is the work of the righteous ruler himself and is offered as both a gift and an obligation to the Church:

Wolves and sheep will live together  
in peace, leopards will lie down with  
young goats, calves and lion cubs  
will feed together and little children  
will take care of them, even a baby  
will not be harmed if it plays near a  
poisonous snake.

So, as we say, let it be.

## NOTES

1. NAROKOBI Bernard Life and Leadership in Melanesia  
IPS USP Suva and UPNG, 1983
2. FINAU Samuela Toa "Gospel and Culture Dialogue Towards a Pacific Theology" in The Cross and the Tanoa  
ed J. Russell Chandran, SPATS Suva, 1988
3. POTTER Philip Life in All its Fullness WCC Geneva, 1981,  
p.88
4. *ibid*

## A PRAYER

*During Pacific Week in September, 1988, a new Botanical Garden was opened at the University of the South Pacific by the President of Fiji. The Interim Chaplain to the University offered the following prayer during the opening ceremony.*

“The Lord God put the human being into the garden to cultivate it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15).

Lord God,

always creating,

always renewing your creation,

you have put us into this world to cultivate it and keep it.

Thankyou for the vision and hard work

of those who have created this garden.

Enable us to take time

to enjoy its beauty,

to pause and notice the variety of plant species,

and wonder at the myriad evolving forms of life.

Help us to study to know and understand more of the mystery of growth

and the interdependence of all living things in our world.

Save us from the carelessness, and greed,

and the unwise use of knowledge

which so easily lead to the destruction of species.

You have put us into this world to cultivate it and keep it.

Let this garden ever remind us

of our responsibility to cultivate and care

for all you have given to us in your love. Amen

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