

Am I not your (To)akoi – neighbour?

Tuvalu is a small island nation floating in the vast Pacific ocean. I was part of the British colony which was called “The Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony.” We became independent on the 1st October 1978. Now we are confronted by Climate Change related sea-level rise. A problem that falls disproportionately on vulnerable communities. Tuvalu rely totally on rain water harvesting for their daily survival. A land area of 26 sq.km and less than 3 meters of land elevation, any increase in sea-level spell our demise. Our contribution to the issue of climate change is almost next to nothing, yet, we are the first to submerge. We lift up our voice to God, why us?

(show 2min video clip)

Those who deny to accept the climate emergency should come and stay with me in Tuvalu – see it for yourself. The science behind this is non-negotiable and that is our reality. You have seen the challenge that our people face in their everyday lives. Our contribution to the issue of climate change is almost next to nothing, nonetheless we suffer at the expense of the others. The language of neighbour seldom used in Climate Change Meetings or COP statements, even at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. It has never been the central focus of climate change negotiations. Very seldom you get to find Pacific scholars talk about the parable of the good Samaritan in relation to climate change.

The geopolitical crisis of what is now reckoned to be the climate emergency inevitably raises the critical questions to do with ‘who is my neighbour?’. The reason for such, lies partly in the way in which the language of the neighbour presupposes a common humanity. The very nature of the global reports coming from international conferences from Kyoto and the Paris Agreement all presume that climate change is a planetary: it is the concern of all and requires a globalized need to act now. Therefore, our understanding of neighbour must go beyond the traditional understanding of ‘someone who lives next door,’ it must and should be transboundary.

The parable of the good Samaritan poses a serious challenge for all of us today. Jesus is not generalizing his parable, he was very specific. That ‘a certain man’ is your *to- akoi* – beaten half dead and left on the side of the road. However, Martin Luther Jr was not only contented to the idea of ‘a certain man’ but also poses two interesting moral questions, that further unpack the story:

So I can imagine that the first question which the Priest and the Levite asked was: “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me? Then

the good Samaritan came by, and by the very nature of his concern reversed the question: “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?”¹

Thus, the Priest and the Levite found a tension between serving (loving) God and loving neighbour and they choose to be loyal to the temple and the law. They were afraid of breaking the Mosaic law. They do not have any social ethics. Their moral responsibilities could not extend out of temple. By reversal, the Samaritan asked “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him? The latter, posed a very pertinent question that is relevant to our time. Let me rephrased the question “If I do not stop to help Tuvalu and other low-lying atolls, what will happen to them? Enele Sopoaga at COP24 in his national statement, offered the following words: “If we don’t do something now and do it with conviction and determination we are condemning all future generations to an intolerable future. Do you want that on your conscience?”² As often, in the climate discourse, the moral dimension of addressing climate change is missing in the international debate. The debate is more on how nations rescue their economy and of course the race to accumulate wealth for their own gain.

The Samaritan was a despised person by the Jews, possibly even by the one who was robbed and wounded. If he was not wounded, probably he will not allow the Samaritan to touch him. For Nick Spencer, “the message: is clear, do not allow ethnic prejudice and rivalries to blind you to your ethical duties, which must always transcend any such differences.”³ Nevertheless, in the mind of the Samaritan, solidarity has no colour and no border. Since he is, a victim of religious racism and religious segregation learned how to be in solidarity with all the victimised. This is a lesson for those who are victimised now by climate change and sea-level rise. Who is the neighbour, will people with “religious rightness” (but enjoy the loot of the capitalist system – who represented by the Priest and the Levite) or people who are victims of structural injustice?

However, let us look into the wounded person as mother earth, and robbers are the capitalist corporations (International Monetary Fund and World Bank), who wantonly exploit and bleed nature. Analysing our economic realities, it dealt with the primary question ‘How does the capitalist world economy exploit the poor, the marginalised, and other working people throughout the world?’ Since the workforce is deprived of producing and regulating production conditions, they are kept underdeveloped. The current world system structured through the

¹ Martin Luther Jr, Draft of Chapter III, “On Being a Good Neighbor,” July 1962- March 1963, Atlanta, <https://stanford.app.box.com/s/975wxpb75wqec6hzel5miofz3mommg29> pg. 482. Accessed 8/3/21

² https://unfccc.int/files/meetings/lima_dec_2014/statements/application/pdf/cop20_hls_tuvalu.pdf

³ Nick Spencer, *The Political Samaritan*, Bloomsbury UK, 2017,122

policies of transnational corporations and international financial agencies, such as the IMF and World Bank, created the underdevelopment of the third world, and created poverty for the majority of the people in the world, while promoting the accumulation of wealth for a minority of the world's people.⁴ Interesting to note that all these dynamic shifts in 'economical approach to nature and structure' are in the interest of profit and promoting of the self. It aims for unlimited growth and invents the GDP measure to quantify a good life. The exploitation of nature and natural resources is key in this pursuit. This is absurd. This is the Normal for the West that we have been gradually accepting.⁵

Arguably, we have departed from our role as stewards of creation. The release of greenhouse emission to the atmosphere kills the life-giving ability of mother earth. The demand from the robbers (neo-capitalist) for profit, result in the enormous amount of energy and gas substance released in the air of burning the fossil fuels. Our dependency on industries that destroy our environment exacerbated climate change and the frequency of disasters prove the failure of our current economic framework. The continuing exploration of our seabed by multinational companies for minerals, large scale of mining, logging, over fishing and so forth, clearly indicate that our current models and leadership cannot prevent the instant bleeding of mother earth. The famous liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff argues that 'liberation theology and eco-theology have something in common – both theologies started from the two bleeding wounds:

The wound of poverty breaks the social fabric of millions of poor people around the world. The other wound, systematic assault on the Earth, breaks down the balance of the planet, which is under threat from the plundering of development as practiced by contemporary global societies.⁶

These two open wounds are the work of the robbers – which their primary aim is to rip rape and convert our natural resources for the luxury of the few. However, I incline to accept the early centuries interpretation of the inn (church) and the Samaritan (Jesus) with additional observation that serves the purpose of this re-reading. The inn to which the recovering man is taken in the church, 'which accepts all people and does not refuse help to anyone, since Jesus says to all: "come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).⁷ The church should not just be viewed as 'the church' but an institution that provide hope and support to 'a certain person'

⁴ MP, theologies of the non-person, 137

⁵ Maina Talia, Embrace our Indigenous Knowledge in our new story,

⁶ Leonardo Boff, Cry of the Earth, Cry of the poor, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997),109

⁷ Nick Spencer, 129

who fall victim of the global economic system. It shouldn't be a church with locked doors, but an institution that guide the blinds and shelter the climate victims.

The priest and Levite are people who are conscious of the situation but take "rule of law" as the maxim. Thus, they have moral reason for not to be engaged in radical action. This is the cases with majority of the "environmental lovers". They talk about, anthropocentrism, reducing plastics, changing light bulbs, encouraging organic agriculture and a host of things, but shy of rejecting the logic of capital. On the same line of this logical denunciation, EKT Theological statement reveal the church worrisome:

We are also wary of the capitalist wisdom which now proposes a new agenda of "fixing the environment". We are wary of the impacts of sustainability proposals such as planting trees, changing light bulbs, tapping renewable energy sources and the likes. Are they aimed as protecting earth or safeguarding the prevailing exploitative economic model? We are wary of the idea that the created earth is a fixable object for humans. We reject this capitalist deception. We believe that the rising of the sea level and the other threats is a clear indication that humankind has departed from the creator God and the covenant made with Noah and all the creations.

The Samaritan challenged the prevailing logic. He was not supposed to touch a religious Jew. By helping a Jew, he could be excluded by his own community. But he showed the costless love which we identify as the love of God. In a situation where common sense is needed to apply without consultation, Desmond Tutu reminded us:

If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.

A neutral theology is a homeless theology, it's a theology without a foundation.⁸ In other words, the role of neutrality played by the Priest and the Levite helps justify the *status quo*. And this is the same 'game of silent' our *tuakoi* are playing in the context of climate change. They continue to see the unprecedented rate of the adversity of climate and the frequency of intensified tropical cyclones, drought, water salinity, king tides, increased of ocean temperature and yet, they cannot make a stop nor to make some fundamental

⁸ C.S Song, Tell us our names, 11.

structural changes to ensure that when ‘a specific man’ comes from Jericho to Jerusalem to sell his produce does not get ambushed. In fact, the reality is that without radical reorganization of the economic system that rob mother earth of her ability to sustain life, we will not find answers to the prevailing problems created by climate change.

Tonight, brother and sister in Christ, who should attempt to answer the lawyers question to Jesus “And who is my neighbour?” This is the same question that we should challenge ourselves and our churches. Challenge our churches to stop praying – but act now. We cannot remain silent while mother earth is being raped and left bleeding on the side of the road. It is our Christian vocation, it is our calling, to do what is ought to be done. It is our moral duty to provide the necessary support to our very own people and neighbour, not just the people next door to us, but to our geopolitical neighbour.

So, who is your neighbour? Am I not your neighbour?

Thank you!