

'Going to and fro', a sermon for World Communion Sunday 2021 based on Job 1:1, 2:1-10 and Mark 6:30-44 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 3 October 2021

In this reflection I am weaving together the theme of World communion, a reflection on the first of a series of readings from the book of Job and the gospel image of a world in which there is a strong sense of solidarity, providing food for everyone.

World Communion: As we learn to live in a world with coronavirus, what wisdom can we gain from that experience? The virus has reminded us of how connected we are. It seems that only four nations are now free of the virus and three are in our neighbourhood – Tonga, Tuvalu and Nauru. Tonga shut its border early on. Tuvalu and Nauru receive very few visitors each year. They are the exceptions world-wide. By contrast, Fiji has suffered. From its first case in May this year, in a population of about 900,000 there have been 51,000 cases and 624 deaths.

In some places the situation is dire. I heard from a friend in South Africa who had had the virus, and for a time it was touch and go as to whether he would live. Many of his extended family have died. In South Africa there have been 3 million cases and 87 thousand deaths.

The virus has also brought to the surface the fragility of our own community. Our sense of being a team of 5M may not be as strong as we thought, including among those who are closest to us, our own family and friends who resist being vaccinated. Our vaccination rate seems closely tied to how strongly we feel communal responsibility. The more distant we feel, the more reluctant we are to be vaccinated. In a nation of diverse cultures, how can we keep reaching beyond our own culture, and our own circles to strengthen national bonds, because that seems to be the call on us at this time. It is in times of vulnerability that those bonds become especially important.

World Communion is about shared vulnerability and responsibility. It was initiated in 1933 when our world seemed especially fractured – we were between the two world wars and amid the Great Depression. The early 1930s saw the beginning of the rise of fascism. And so, in the face of the fracturing, in Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, in a congregation like ours, people wanted to celebrate the world communion we have in Christ. Communion is an event in which we act out our vulnerability and take up our responsibility. We celebrate a bonding, to the earth, to the generations in the communion of saints, to the God we know in Jesus Christ, to atua, tangata, papatuanuku. All these, gifts God has given us in Christ.

That sense of shared vulnerability and responsibility is crucial for addressing our biggest challenge, climate change. Our closest neighbours, the churches of the Pacific, bear the brunt of it. Our membership of the Pacific Conference of Churches enables their voices to be spoken and heard. Let me read what the General Secretary of the Conference said earlier this year. We are often protected from the rawness of people's emotions, but it is best to hear them in their directness ...

... while the world's focus is on COVID-19, in our region we continue to face the impacts of Climate Change – rising seas, ocean warming and acidification and extreme weather such as severe tropical cyclones ... Our sisters and brothers under the weight of colonial powers face not only economic, ecological and social oppression, their communities are at risk from COVID-19 because of decisions made by their colonizers. Under closed borders our seafarers cannot return home, and while larger countries are not sending their citizens as tourists, they are extracting our people as labourers under seasonal worker programmes and labour schemes to fulfil their needs. Under neo-colonialism and neo-liberal economics, extractive industries further desecrate our land and pillage our sea as many

of our governments follow policies that lead us further into the foreign debt trap. And so we cry our songs of lament, protest, hope and justice.

Today's reading from Job is the first of a series over the next weeks. In the reading today we are faced with the idea that there are powers at work beyond our recognition that are shaping our lives. In the reading, they are named in a metaphorical way, of Satan and God going to and fro across the world. Being with Pacific churches facing the impact of climate change, that is what it feels like, that they are experiencing the consequences of actions for which they are not responsible. There are powers beyond them, going to and fro, and they are having to live with the outcome. They are not major carbon emitters. They are not the people in high places talking beyond scrutiny to determine what is conveyed in the press and how it is conveyed. They are not the colonising powers. And yet they are having to live as pawns in a powerplay as if Satan roams far and wide across the globe.

This is part of our history as a people of faith - in the life of Judea and Israel, subject to the toing and froing of foreign powers, and with their experience of exile, forced out of their land, their patterns of living and believing upended. And in the time of Jesus, with the toing and froing of Roman rule, the controlling of life by a fickle foreign power.

In Communion, the God who comes to us is the God who entered that world and experienced that powerlessness, a God who shares our vulnerability. This is not God as instrument, who does our bidding, who saves us from suffering. God did not contract to protect the good or fix the suffering.

We are Job people - Jesus people who know vulnerability. Somehow, in God's hands, that shared vulnerability becomes solidarity, community, responsibility to each other. It becomes Communion for the common good.

The story of the feeding of the 5000 is a picture of what that world becomes in God. A community in which some do not have enough becomes a community in which everyone has enough. A world in which poverty patterns itself again in the distribution of vaccines becomes a world in which the poor are vaccinated. We become part of God's world-wide communion, binding us together across all borders and divisions. Thanks be to God.

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