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Season of Creation 2020:

“A Call for Jubilee for the Earth and Renewal of the Original Norm”

Homily/Sermon delivered by Rev. James Bhagwan, General Secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches at the Season of Creation Ecumenical Prayer Service hosted by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Suva, at the Sacred Heart Cathedral 1st September, 2020

Scripture Reading: Leviticus 25: 1 -13 (MSG)

God spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai, "Speak to the People of Israel. Tell them: When you enter the land which I am going to give you, the land will observe a Sabbath to God.

Sow your fields, prune your vineyards, and take in your harvests for six years. But the seventh year the land will take a Sabbath of complete and total rest, a Sabbath to God; you will not sow your fields or prune your vineyards.

Don't reap what grows of itself; don't harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land gets a year of complete and total rest.

But you can eat from what the land volunteers during the Sabbath year - you and your men and women servants, your hired hands, and the foreigners who live in the country, and, of course, also your livestock and the wild animals in the land can eat from it.

Whatever the land volunteers of itself can be eaten.

"The Fiftieth Year Shall Be a Jubilee for You"

"Count off seven Sabbaths of years - seven times seven years: Seven Sabbaths of years adds up to forty-nine years.

Then sound loud blasts on the ram's horn on the tenth day of the seventh month, the Day of Atonement. Sound the ram's horn all over the land.

Sanctify the fiftieth year; make it a holy year. Proclaim freedom all over the land to everyone who lives in it - a Jubilee for you: Each person will go back to his family's property and reunite with his extended family.

The fiftieth year is your Jubilee year: Don't sow; don't reap what volunteers itself in the fields; don't harvest the untended vines because it's the Jubilee and a holy year for you.

You're permitted to eat from whatever volunteers itself in the fields.

"In this year of Jubilee everyone returns home to his family property.

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of each of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer, Amen.”

I am very grateful for the invitation to share a reflection on the theme jubilee for the earth as we mark the beginning of the 2020 Season for Creation. I bring greetings from your sisters and brothers across the Pacific Household of God.

Today we mark the 31st year since Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I proclaimed 1 September as a day of prayer for creation for the Orthodox Church, which coincides with the start of the Orthodox church year, which begins with a commemoration of how God created the world.

Over the years the Season for Creation has grown to a month-long celebration for the world's 2.2 billion Christians to come together to care for our common home.

The theme for the 2020 Season of Creation is "Jubilee for the Earth: New Rhythms, New Hope."

The global steering committee wrote the following words to introduce the theme: "This year, amid crises that have shaken our world, we're awakened to the urgent need to heal our relationships with creation and each other. During the season this year, we enter a time of restoration and hope, a jubilee for our Earth, that requires radically new ways of living with creation."

For us in the Pacific, this is not a new song. It is one of the Lord's songs that we have been singing in the strange times that we have encountered since the imposition of extractive capitalism, first through colonialism and then neo-liberal economic globalisation which reduces us to resources and labour to be extracted for production and places little or no value on our spirituality, on our identity, on our culture, on our indigenous knowledge and wisdom, and on our values.

Even before COVID19 gave the world pause for thought, Pacific communities and churches had been part of the many voices lamenting the unravelling of the sacred thread of the web of life, the disconnection between ecology, economy and spirituality – the unravelling of the magimagi – the cords that hold together the household of God's creation – this whole inhabited earth.

In his message for International Mother Earth Day 2020, United Nations Secretary General, António Guterres, said that, "Mother Earth is clearly urging a call to action," adding, "we need a shift to a more sustainable economy that works for both people and the planet. Let's promote harmony with nature and the Earth".¹

Nature is suffering. In the last couple of weeks we've seen the Californian bushfires. We remember the Australian bushfires, heat records and the worst locust invasion in Kenya. Now we face COVID -19, a worldwide health pandemic which is linked to the health of our ecosystem. Climate change, man-made changes to nature as well as crimes that disrupt biodiversity, such as deforestation, land-use change, intensification of agriculture and livestock production or the growing illegal wildlife trade, can increase contact and the transmission of infectious diseases from animals to humans (zoonotic diseases) like COVID-19.²

In the early months of COVID19 there were stories of the visible, positive impact on the environment: improved air quality, reduced greenhouse gas emissions. But these "improvements" were temporary, because they came on the back of tragic economic slowdown and human distress."³

A senior BBC journalist asked the question, "When the pandemic eventually subsides, will carbon and pollutant emissions "bounce back" so much that it will be as if this clear-skied

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/earth-day>

² <https://www.un.org/en/observances/earth-day>

³ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/earth-day>

interlude never happened? Or could the changes we see today have a more persistent effect?”⁴

In the video we watched, there was a little section about the “Earth Overshoot,” the using up and going beyond what resources the earth can produce in a year. Just a few weeks ago, on August 22nd, the 8th month of the year, we reached Earth Overshoot Day. So everything that we consume now is beyond what the earth can renew or produce this year. I also noted in that video that we the Pacific are lumped again with Asia as Asia-Pacific when they talk about our footprint on the Earth. Our impact is not even the size of a little toe of that footprint. Yet we pay the price.

Our Scripture reading from Leviticus today makes the call for Jubilee, which we can apply as a Jubilee for the Earth. A call for a “renewal” of our normal for abundant life. What might these calls offer Pacific churches and communities?

Jubilee for the Earth

In Judaism and Christianity, the concept of the Jubilee is a special year of remission of sins and universal pardon. In the Biblical Book of Leviticus, a Jubilee year is mentioned to occur every fiftieth year, in which slaves and prisoners would be freed, debts would be forgiven, and the mercies of God would be particularly manifest.⁵

This was intrinsically connected to ensuring that the land enjoyed a Sabbath ensuring renewal of the soil every seventh year.⁶

When this law was followed, there was to be no pruning or planting in the sabbath year, nor any attempt to kill the insects, or otherwise interfere with natural processes in the field. The fruit had to remain in the field, except for what passers-by, servants, or owners plucked to eat; no real harvesting was permitted, only eating.

As a result, the land rested, and soil was restored. As weeds grew, they brought topsoil minerals from below and to revitalize the soil. Unpruned vines and trees grew freely, renewing their vitality. Ripened fruit, which when unpicked, fell and rotted, feeding the soil.

“The function of microorganisms in the soil, and the value of compost and trees in regenerating the soil is great. So is the value of wild animals and birds in the life cycles of the earth. The earth clearly is renewed by rest, or it is exploited ruthlessly and finally turned into a desert.”⁷

So we have this concept, a biblical concept of Sabbath for the land and Jubilee for the land. However, the extractive nature of the modern capitalist economic norm gives no room for a sabbath for land. Instead, the land is enslaved and exploited. Instead of natural cycles working in harmony, manufactured fertilizers, poisonous herbicides and pesticides and other devices are used, and the soil is steadily mined and abused.

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200326-covid-19-the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-the-environment>

⁵ Leviticus 25:10

⁶ Leviticus 25:1-4

⁷ <http://www.ecclesia.org/truth/sabbath-land.html>

This brief respite that the land, oceans, rivers and even air have received as a result of COVID-19-induced lockdowns, has shown what is possible if humankind allows the earth to experience a sabbath, a jubilee.

Renewal of Hearts, Minds, and Lifestyles – Recommitting to “The Way”

Many of us around the world have been calling the effect of the lockdowns across the planet due to COVID-19, the “New Normal”. We even have a new normal for the way we worship in church: hand-sanitizers, contact-tracing, spacing of pews and in lines to receive the sacrament.

But we’ve seen something else: a reprioritising of values; more family time, albeit enforced; a return to indigenous traditional practices of food security for those who have lost employment or income; the reintroduction of barter systems in some communities, like bartering for a better Fiji.⁸ In terms of spirituality, we have been innovative using appropriate technology and by promoting home worship which have strengthened family spirituality. New ways of working, connecting and interacting are being used. We have begun to realise what we can do without, what is important to us. Individualism and materialism which provides the energy for capitalism are waning, as relationality and positive traditional values and spirituality are increasing.

Yet, I would like to suggest that this is not a new normal. It is a return to the original normal. The normal that is the way of the Kingdom of God. The normal that is the way of our Pacific culture.

This current normal that we have acquiesced to is a predatory system of economic extraction which contradicts the purpose of God, through bondage by acquisitiveness, militarization, and consumerism.⁹

This extractive totalism of the current normal is contradictory to our Pacific spirituality and indigenous wisdom. It denies the intrinsic value of creation.

This naming of this destructive totalism in lament as we cry, in truth-telling and as the imagination of alternatives to the continuing economic, political and cultural globalisation was articulated by Jesus, as the Kingdom of God.¹⁰ The Kingdom of God speaks to an economy of abundance at a time when the scarcity model is the dominant narrative. This speaks to the resilience of not only Pacific islanders, but all humankind.

We are well aware of the words of Jesus in John 10:10, that the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.” And to this we speak and act to manifest the will of God and His Son, Jesus, the Word made flesh, that there be “life in abundance.”

As those behind this deadly normal seek to resuscitate it, even while many still struggle and suffer as a result of COVID-19, let us dare to speak the prophetic word of an alternative to

⁸ In Fiji, for example a barter network using social media has been established:

https://www.facebook.com/groups/2964591663604507/?multi_permalinks=2966722400058100¬if_id=1587527613569846¬if_t=group_activity

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, “Jesus Acted Out The Alternative To Empire,” Speech to Sojourners’ 2018 #SummitforChange, 22nd June, 2018, <https://sojo.net/articles/walter-brueggemann-jesus-acted-out-alternative-empire>

¹⁰ John 10:10

this “normal.” As His Holiness Pope Frances prayed, “political and economic planning for recovery after the coronavirus pandemic would be inspired by concern for the common good and not for “the god money.”¹¹

St. Paul challenges us, in his letter to the Romans, not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds in order to what is good and acceptable and perfect – the will of God.¹²

A renewal is required to address the loneliness of spirit that the world feels, the hunger of the human heart that material gain cannot satisfy.

The Season of Creation, in the context of COVID-19, offers us to look at jubilee, at resurrection and renewal; at abundant grace as an alternative to the current normal, a normal of exploitation of creation and of death. We are people of the resurrection, which offers a renewal of the normal: a reorientation to us as followers of The Way, the normal that God saw “was very good,”¹³ and the Kingdom of God inaugurated by Christ, who renews all things.¹⁴

Pacific Churches are challenged to advocate this renewal as we have done in the past.

We have do so with the vision of the “Island of Hope” articulated by Pacific Churches and offered to the world at the dawn of this century and we are doing so again.¹⁵

All of creation is groaning. There is fear, disconnect and anguish, as profit, as greed drives us only to address the symptoms, while the planet and all creatures that call it home are dying from this...this lifestyle disease.

There is a need to renew our ancient normal.

I’m the chaplain for the Uto Ni Yalo Trust, our Fijian traditional voyaging society. However, before I voyaged on the Uto Ni Yalo, Anglican Archbishop Emeritus, Rev. Dr. Winston Halapua sailed on her from Samoa to Fiji. The President of the Fiji Council of Churches, Rev. Dr. Tevita Banivanua has also sailed on the vaka. I’m hoping that this year we may get Archbishop Peter Loy Chong to join us for a sail during the Season of Creation.

One of the activities of the Uto Ni Yalo Trust is to take camakau, our traditionally designed canoes to island and coastal communities, to renew sustainable sea-transport, in particular amongst our young people. This is a renewal of the ancient normal.

¹¹ <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2020/04/pope-says-pandemic-recovery-involves-choice-between-money-or-common-good/?fbclid=IwARoYJoScbtKvB668USstWFgUuHrlnBZn15hngrqBJD62rpMWnkfhFCnMoWA>

¹² Romans 12:2

¹³ Genesis 1:31

¹⁴ Revelation 21:1-6

¹⁵ In the Island of Hope life is significant, valued and celebrated. There is a celebration of life over material wealth...The Island of Hope is in tune with nature and by sharing and caring, to which people want to journey in order to celebrate life in all its fullness (Isa. 25:6)...The Island of Hope has the "mana" (power) to draw human beings together.” The Island of Hope is sustainable, wholesome, peaceful and all-embracing...The concept of the Island of Hope is not merely a dream. It is founded in reality and has been “our normal” life in our islands....

World Council of Churches, *Island of Hope: The Pacific Churches’ Response to Alternatives on Globalisation*, (Geneva: WCC, 2001).

Later this month, the Pacific Theological College will launch three publications that attempt to reconnect the severed threads that connect ecology, economics, spirituality and morality in to a rich tapestry, a reweaving of the ecological mat, to offer a renewal of mind and soul, an ecological development framework and an ecological accounting model that places well-being ahead of profit, and the intrinsic value of living things ahead of the market value as resources for production.

We are talking now about Jubilee as a business practice, and life in abundance as profit.

My sisters and brothers, during this Season of Creation, let us journey into a profound, a deeper relationship with both Creator and Creation.

Let us touch the soil and tend to the earth.

Let us protect the ocean and move gently upon it.

Let us do our part for clean air and sky.

And let us sing a new Lord's song and work together so that everything that has breath: the trees and the seas that make oxygen, and the creatures that breathe it to live – everything that has breath pay praise the Lord!

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: Amen.