

CALLED TO BE WISE AS A SERPENT AND INNOCENT AS A DOVE

(Matthew 10: 16)

***(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr I.S.Tuwere at Davuilevu Theological College
Community Worship on Friday 22nd of May, 2009 at 7.30 pm)***

Scripture Readings:

- Matthew 10: 1 – 20
- 1 Corinthians 2: 18 – 24.

The call to be wise as a serpent and humble or innocent as a dove comes to us from the context of mission; the mission of the twelve disciples. This mission is preceded by Jesus' mission. Jesus is now sending out his disciples to villages and cities he had visited already. They are to look out for his footprints in these places.

In the first three gospels, Jesus is reported to have been "teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom." When he saw the crowd, his heart went out to them for they were like sheep without a shepherd. At the close of chapter nine, he says to his disciples. "The harvest is plentiful but the labourer's are few. Therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourer's into his harvest."

It is important to get that message from Matthew's report right. That the mission of the twelve follows on from the mission of Jesus. Mission in the first place does not belong to the disciples. It belongs to Jesus. Any mission carried out in his name must be defined and carried out from this perspective.

Now, the disciples rise up to follow him into the cities and villages. The mission of the twelve, or the seventy or the mission of the church for that matter is participation in the one and the same mission – the mission of Jesus Christ the sovereign Lord. Therefore our concentration on him and our personal relationship with him is important and crucial.

The sending out of the twelve is reported by all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Nowhere do we see in each of these accounts Jesus instructing his disciples to go out and **convert** the people in those cities and villages to join the group of his disciples. Or for people to leave their homes or villages and follow Jesus. For discipleship is very much an open circle. There are those who have heard the call and followed him. And there are those who have heard the call, made their commitment but told to return to their homes.

The commanding purpose of this mission is not to convert but to **proclaim**. To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom. The Kingdom that is now present in Jesus of Nazareth.

He who says that he is filled with the "Spirit of the Lord and has been anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. To let the oppressed go free" is here. He is not only the bearer

of the Kingdom of God. He is its very *embodiment*. Wherever he is bodily, there is the Kingdom.

Mission as this is perceived in the school of Jesus is basically to improve the quality of life in villages and cities. To see that the basic human needs are met, the oppressed go free, the poor are taken care of, people are freed from all forms of disease. For these common things in life are gateways into things divine. Mission is first and last is about **Life**. The whole of life, in villages and communities.

This is what we get from Holy Communion. For Holy Communion is the meeting point of the 'Holy' and the 'Common' – hence *Holy Communion*. The whole of life should be treated as our Holy Communion before God. Mission basically is participation in this Eucharistic vision. To keep the union between things seen and things unseen. That the blind may see and the deaf hear, the lepers are cleansed. This is to be taken in both its spiritual and material sense.

Mission with the knowledge that the Kingdom of God is at hand is to participate in making and keeping human life human. Not going out with the **crusading mind** as a good deal of preachers are doing now in Fiji, trying to move people away from their towns and villages or from their way of life. But to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God. The promise of this Kingdom is demonstrated by the freeing of people from all forms of disease, of poverty and oppression. Whenever and wherever this is happening, there is the Kingdom of God. And wherever this is carried out, there is the Kingdom, there is Christ. Now the disciples are empowered by their teacher and Lord to go out in his name and authority.

In this mission, they are to go in twos as reported by Mark. The number **two** is the minimum number for community. And this suggests that Mission in the name and authority of Jesus is a community affair, an ecumenical affair if you like. It must be undertaken ecumenically. Ecumenical in the sense of interconfessional or between churches, and trans-confessional, that is to say, joining together to respond to the challenges of the present day world.

Mission does not begin when we leave the theological college. As if it is the responsibility of the church, minus theology and theological education. Theological work or theological education must be seen as an undertaking in mission. The total structure of a theological college or institution, its purpose, curriculum and religious life must be governed by this spirit of mission. Mission that is **driven not by a crusading mind but a crucified mind. A crucified way of life.**

Spirit of mission is the spirit that goes out of oneself in order to be with the other. So that the other may benefit. This 'other' may come in different forms. But the ultimate aim is the building up the whole community in Christ. This is the significance of moving out in twos. Mission is a community enterprise, an ecumenical venture of faith.

Davuilevu Theological College and the whole Church in Fiji and Rotuma is now at the crossroad of the old and new. How do you bridge the two, the old and the new? That is a searching missionary question. A fresh definition of the present

context here in Fiji is urgently needed. This is a call to you theological teachers and students to undertake. This place must be at the forefront of research and learning. It must take the lead in the church's search for strategies in mission. It is a different Fiji. A post-coup situation, a post-modern period, challenging and exciting, and therefore calls for a fresh agenda for the mission of the church.

So we need joint responses, not isolated and individual responses to these questions and challenges. The four distinct arms or branches – *itaukei*, *Rotuma*, *Indian*, and *Rabi* of the Methodist church in Fiji must be taken seriously. Not only one or two but each one of them. For the call to work together is not something peripheral but central to the demand of the gospel itself. And the *four* arms together with other sister institutions must try to move beyond areas of their present common endeavours and continue to ask themselves the question: what further common task can we do together?

Not only questions that have to do with their relationship as churches or institutions but also questions that relate to joint responses to the challenges of the present day world. Not only inter-confessional questions dealing with doctrines, structures and restructuring, but trans-confessional questions as well that relate us and what we do to the social and political challenges of our day.

The mission to which theological education and churches are called is not going to be easy. It was never meant to be easy. It will always be carried out within the gap between the sheep and the wolf. Jesus tells his disciples: "I am sending you out like sheep in the midst of wolves." This gap will always be there in the world, between the vulnerable defenseless sheep and the bloody-minded hostile wolf. The gap is not going to be less sophisticated in the coming years.

So we have to examine ourselves. Think again. If you expect that this mission is going to be a nice ride, where you are going to have a good time. I think you are on the wrong bus; the wrong boat. What is given is certainly power and authority from the Lord. But what is promised is suffering, insecurity and even persecution.

We are to go out, armed with two things: **Wisdom** and **Humility**. "Be wise as a serpent and humble as a dove".

The Greeks had three great words describing three great qualities of the mind. And if a person possessed these three qualities he/she had a mind ready and well prepared. The NT writers took over these three great words for they were sure that the qualities which they describe were to be found in Jesus and in Jesus alone.

The *first* is what they call **Sophia** which translates Wisdom. This is wisdom of ultimate things. Knowledge of things both human and divine. It is theoretical wisdom. (The Bible and the Newspaper).

Second is **Phronesis** or Prudence. Prudence is practical. Sophia has to do with man's mind and thought. Prudence has to do with a man's life, his conduct and action. It is where we have to judge what is to be done and what is not to be

done. It has to do with ***the arrangement of human life***. (Nona bula ena veisiga – vuvale, iteitei etc.).

Third is **Sunesis** or knowledge. Sunesis is the faculty of putting two and two together. It is **critical thinking**. The power of distinguishing between different courses of action, different values of things, different relationships between people. The ability to criticise and to evaluate and to form judgments.

King Solomon prays that he may receive the three (I Kings 3:12; 4:29). The four wise children in the Daniel story have *knowledge* and *skill* and *learning* and *wisdom* (1:17).

Theological education will be all the more poorer if it acquires only one of these. The picture of the wise man is often the picture of a man locked in his study and buried in his books and lost in his research. A man quite out of touch with life and indeed quite inefficient in the day to day conduct of life – the absent-minded student or professor.

The Greek, biblical and Pacific view of life all agree that such a person is an incomplete human being. Though he/she may have Sophia, he/she certainly has neither prudence nor critical knowledge.

On the other hand, the common picture of a practical man is that he is so busy with the practical concerns of life that he has neither the time nor the inclination to trouble himself with theology or philosophy. Again that man is incomplete.

The great vision of biblical thought is the vision of a complete person who is wise in the things of eternity and efficient in the things of time. May you grow more and more toward that goal each day here in Davuilevu, in your future ministry wherever that may take you and in our life's journey.

Wisdom is the property of God and the characteristic of Jesus. In the NT it is the distinguishing mark of a Christian. Wisdom is connected with prayer and with the Holy Spirit and with God. It is God's gift, not man's discovery.

Although it is God's gift, it can be taught. Real wisdom comes when the Spirit of God reaches down to meet the searching mind of men. The mind of a man must search before God will come to meet it. It is not for the mentally lazy even though it is the gift of God.

Wisdom can degenerate easily. We see that in Solomon through his amassing the treasures of this world. That is the wisdom of the crafty serpent and is not to be ours. It has no knowledge of the things that matter. The type of wisdom that is only full of words without the power of the Cross of Christ as we hear from our reading – "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God".

In this mission we are also to combine wisdom with the humility and innocence of the dove. The dove has a favourite place in the Bible. Its moaning, its powers of flight, its nesting in rocks, its colours, its eyes, its loyalty and gentleness all have

something to say about the high and abiding virtues in life. It serves as a symbol of innocence in Matthew 10:16.

In the gospels, the Spirit of God which came upon Jesus after his baptism is said to have descended "like a dove", (Matt. 3:16). This reminds us of the 'hovering' of the Spirit of God in creation. And the role which the dove played in the flood tradition (Gen. 8: 8-12). The divine voice is sometime likened to the cooing of the dove.

So to be humble or innocent as a dove is an invitation to become carriers or instruments of peace. To stand for reconciliation. To become agents for change , renewal and new beginning. There is here an element of gentleness, but behind that gentleness there is the strength of steel.

It is not a spineless gentleness, a sentimental fondness, a passive quietism. It is strength under control. Numbers 12:3 tells us that Moses was the "meekest" upon the earth, but that same Moses was a man who would act with decision and blaze with anger when the occasion arose.

No men can attain by himself such a character. He or she has to be God-controlled for only God can give him that perfect mystery.

It should be our prayer that God will make us become wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove so that we may become masters of ourselves for only then can we be servants of others.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Amen.
