

Scripture Readings:*O.T. – Psalm 137**Gospel – Matthew 16: 13-20***Texts:** *“How could we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”*

(Psalm 137:4)

“Who do you say that I am?”

(Matthew 16:15).

(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. I.S.Tuwere at Dilkusha Methodist Church, Nausori in a Welcome Service, on the occasion of the 46th meeting of the Annual Indian Division Meeting, Monday 4th May 2009 at 7.30 pm).

**“THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY
WITHIN THE HUMAN COMMUNITY”**

The life situations from which these questions come are quite clear; Babylon in the OT (modern Iraq) and Caesarea Philippi in the New. When pressed to sing a song of the Lord in Babylon, the early Israelites with uncertainty and nervousness asked the question: How could we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land? And Jesus faced with the question of his identity in Caesarea Philippi asked his disciples, who do you say I am?

Both questions are about identity. Christian identity if you like. They come from two different situations but share few things in common. Both cities – Babylon and Caesarea Philippi were famous places for trade and commerce in their days of glory. Because of this they both enjoyed the attention of travelers. They were parts of the known or habitable world in their own time.

Babylon with its hanging garden was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The setting of the city of Caesarea Philippi was one of the most beautiful and luxuriant in Palestine. Both places like similar places worshipped other gods, not Yahweh the God of Israel. So the two questions from our texts come to us from foreign places or pagan cities, but seriously addressing themselves to the presence and reality of God, maker of heaven and earth.

And it is important to remind ourselves that the ever living God in the Persons of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit is not only the answer to our many questions in life. He also is the **Question** itself. He questions us now and again as to who He is and following on from this, who we might be. Some of the most searching and sharpest questions that have been raised with the Christian church during the course of its history and have helped shaped its life and formulate its doctrine come from these heathen places or habitable world in which God is continually at work.

By asking this question, How could we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?... The early Hebrews were in fact asking themselves. *How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?* How can we name Him...call upon his name... witness to and for Him? A self-examination if you like. An inward looking that involved some uneasiness, some anguish and anxiety. For Israel, it was a difficult situation, a situation of conflict out of which a new creation is about to take place, a new tomorrow is to be born.

The Lord's song was more than just another ordinary matter of fact song. The song of the Lord was the heartbeat of their religious life. "The Lord is my strength and my song and he has become my salvation" (Exodus 15:2). The song of the Lord was the staying power of their political and national life. Now they had to sing it in a different situation. In many ways strange.

The Lord's song was their identity as a land; as a people, a nation. They had to sort out who they were in this situation, as a religious community and as a people. A situation or particular habitable earth under the control of God, maker of heaven and earth.

In the midst and heart of this unfamiliar territory Jesus was calling his disciples to name him there. To call upon his name. To say and to say clearly who he is. To proclaim and live by the sovereign rule of God in that pagan and strange city.

Each mission context has its own degree of strangeness. Here in Fiji in our post-coup situation, our context has its own features of unfamiliarity and strangeness. Familiar landmarks of the 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s 80s and 90s have now gone. The word that best describe our situation today is fragmentation. We live a very fragmented life – broken communities, broken homes, racial and ethnic conflicts, increase in violence of all sorts, increasing poverty in different forms with different faces. We have the latest ware in our amazing information technology but we hardly understand one another. We seem to be drifting apart everyday.

So in the crucible of this fragmentation, brokenness, conflict and disunity, God is calling us to sing his song, to name him again in the changed political and historical situation in this our home country of Fiji. Now, I want to suggest few things that should make up the way we sing this song of the Lord now in our post-coup and multicultural setting.

First, please bear in mind that Jesus is Lord already before we go out and say to the people that he is Lord. This means that his Lordship does not depend on our preaching or witnessing. As if to suggest that if we preach or witness poorly, the Lordship of Jesus is going to be adversely affected. No, that is not correct. It is wrong. He is Lord already before we go out on our mission. And he is there already before we arrive. We do not take him there but we take the good news about him. Please remember that we need some clear thinking and humility in this mission. He says, “I will be with you always to the end of the age.”

There is another dimension to this Lordship that must be pointed out. Jesus is not telling us that we are the only people in the world that he will use in this mission. No, that also is not correct. Because he is Lord already of church and world, he will choose anybody to work with him in this mission. He says, “You did not choose me but I chose you to go out and bear fruit.”

What does this imply? It means that our primary missionary task as a church is to help build up the **human community** in our midst. And the church is part of that human community. We are called **to help make and keep human life human**. That is sorely lacking right now in our different communities in Fiji. It is the loss of the image of God in our dealing with one another. Everybody is created in that image irrespective of race, color or creed. The restoration of that image in every human being is the primary task of the Church in any given situation at any given time.

*Remember I am not saying, the Christian community and the human community. What I am saying is the Christian community **within** the human community.*

Remember what the prophet Jeremiah tells the Israelites in captivity in Babylon when they asked the question, How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? This is Jeremiah's answer in his letter to them. (Jeremiah 29: 4-7).

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare".

So build up the human community in your midst. For in its welfare you may also find your welfare.

The presence of community and community spirit in the bible is overwhelming. It begins from the very moment when the first man was created. Man and woman (humanity) were created in the context of a communion within the God-head. The intention of God to create mankind issued out in the *plural* not in the singular – “Let **us** make man in **our** image” (Genesis 1:26). Relationship and communion was planted into man at the very moment of his coming into being. The restoration of this broken relationship and communion – between man and God, man and woman, man and the rest of creation sums up the goal of the church’s mission in today’s world. For the present world we now live in is a broken and fragmented world in many ways. For this reason, St. Paul best sums up the heart of the gospel message when he says: “*God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself...that he has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation*” (2 Cor. 5:18).

The story of Adam and Eve – representatives of the whole of mankind is the story of broken relationship with God. Cain and Abel – representative man in community is the story of broken relationship between man and man. Adam, Eve and the serpent is the story of broken relationship between humanity and the rest of creation. The restoration of these broken relationships is where this missionary God directs his saving and liberating work in Jesus Christ. As a Church and Christ’s body in the world, we are called to work with him, with God in this, his reconciling deed.

In the NT we see Jesus always bringing community to life – occasional communities as in the feeding of that huge crowd in Matthew and Mark. Permanent communities as of the twelve (Lk. 6: 13-16) and of the seventy (Lk. 10: 1-12). Close communities along the roads, by the lakesides and in the households of friends. Jesus’ ministry was one of community creation. He sends out his disciples in twos, the minimum number for community.

In a world being torn apart by different forces of fragmentation – identity politics, ethnic rivalries and violence in various forms, the Christian church is called to witness to God’s call for the unifying, reconciling hope of the gospel. Mission in this new situation is nothing short of a well informed social engagement and community building. Individuals and church groups – men & women fellowships, young people should be empowered to find in the very midst of the evil and darkness of personal and social life a **power** that awakes in them hope and resourcefulness to determine their future. This power is nothing less than the power of the resurrected Lord who says:

“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Let me conclude this brief meditation. In the parable of Jesus about the father and his two sons. One son said “yes” and wouldn’t go. The other son said “no” and would go. The world is made up of these two kinds of people. There are those who say “yes” and don’t go. There are those who say “no” and do. And there are people who say “yes” and do. Now it is essential that there should be people who say the right thing. But it is equally essential that there should be people who do the right thing.

Now the world is full of people, some of whom only say the right thing and some of whom only do the right thing. **Jesus can use both.** The important thing is to be sure that as many people as possible say and do the right thing. But don’t write off the people who only say the right things, they are also important.

In our going out we are commanded in the great commission to go and “disciple” all nations. The word disciple unfortunately is a noun in the English language. In the New Testament it is always a verb, a doing word. We are called to go out and disciple the people, make them his disciples. That is the primary goal of this

mission of God. Not to increase the number of local preachers or *talatala*. We are not ruling that out but it is not the primary aim. The primary aim is to win more people to become faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are to disciple the nation. To increase the number of disciples. To make and to keep human life human. That was what Jesus did when he was here on earth.

To disciple the nation is to see that:

- The blind receive their sight
- The lame walk
- The sick are made whole
- The deaf hear
- Those in prison are visited
- The poor receive the good news
- The street kids are cared for
- The dead are raised.

These are the marks of discipling the nation. Not in abstract terms but making visible what the Christian community believes and stands for within the human community.

So sing the Lord's song we must and keep naming him as Lord we should, in modern day Fiji. I believe the Lord God will not allow us to agonize over every problem or difficulty we might face. He is encouraging us to sing along. To celebrate the fact that he is sovereign Lord of all. To rejoice. To keep holiday in the midst of our working day. For the changed historical situation in whatever form or whatever time is a process whereby God is using his servants - men and women of his own choosing to carry out his purpose for mankind.

Jurgen Moltmann, the well-known German theologian opens his large book on the Church with the sentence: "This book is intended to help the church find its

bearings the fundamental questions have to be answered afresh: Where do you come from? Where are you going? Who are you?"

The questions from our texts are sending us back to those fundamental questions. Where do you come from? From the hand of the living God who engaged with men in a new way through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the outpouring of his Spirit. Where are you going? To make disciples of all nations: to fulfil the commission with which we have been charged. Who are you? A people with whom that same Christ has promised that he will be present, to the close of the ages.

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

AMEN.
