

Introduction to second keynote speaker

Good morning everyone. My task is to introduce our next keynote speaker: a great honour but a task I feel very inadequate for. I shall try.

The Revd Professor Dr Feleterika Uili Nokise is the son of Samoan parents Pepe and Lili'a and father to James, Tualagi, Samoana and Fetuao. In March 1977 he was ordained in the Presbyterian Church of *Ayo-tear-roa* (Aoteroa) New Zealand and inducted at First Church of Otago. His ministry has included periods of service in Chaplaincy at *Whycatto* (Waikato) University, St Ronan's Eastbourne Parish, St David's *Petonay* (Petone) and in Theological Education at Knox College.

His historical and missiological research at Masters level was completed in 1978 at the University of Otago: a History of the Pacific Islands Congregational Church in New Zealand 1943-69. His Doctoral work was undertaken at the Australian National University, Canberra where he wrote about the role of the London Missionary Society's Samoan missionaries in the evangelisation of the South West Pacific 1839-1930. He has been Principal of the Pacific Theological College since 2002.

His keynote address this morning which we await with anticipation tackles again that much debated dynamic in ecumenical and missiological studies: Gospel and Culture. The freedom of a Christian and his or her cultural identity. Being Principal at PTC has given our speaker an enviable observation platform from which to scrutinise and analyse such matters over the years. In 2015, in a piece written in *Oceanic Voyages*, to celebrate PTCs 50th anniversary, Professor Nokise writes of how early missionaries from Britain to the Pacific were, and I quote, 'ill-equipped in terms of cultural awareness and sensitivity and so had no choice but to express and present the Christian message in the norms and values of their own cultural milieu'. Sir, we confidently expect that your address will better equip a present generation of the mission minded. We are immensely grateful that you have taken time from your sabbatical leave to speak to this gathering, and we are alert for your wisdom. May we welcome our speaker.

Summary of address

Professor Nokise began with the question, 'Is there nothing good in us before we accept Jesus Christ?' as a starting point for his Pacific response to Luther on the freedom of a Christian.

As a Pacific Islander, he reacted against the **dualism** he perceived in Luther and emphasised the interconnected realities of Samoan life: the maintenance of relationships of mutual respect, also of the nurturing and respect of the spaces in-between. All this is sacred work now, and was before the arrival of Christianity

Missionaries introduced the 'Unseen God' but this was not new. Samoan creation stories acknowledged such. But for the Pacific there is always spirituality and genealogy: what matters is embodied in flesh and family. The missionary demand to worship an unseen God has meant a constant contextual sifting of missionary messages.

Harmony is uppermost – so if a Samoan is in dialogue with Luther, key issues would be:

- no separation of physical and spiritual: the whole person is involved
- Christianity expressed solely as faith in the word of God limits the capacity of God
- reciprocity: Samoans and the world of 'good' works is actually about naturally occurring, essential, relational living

The goal through a Pacific optic is harmonious relationship before salvation.

Professor Nokise acknowledged the contribution of contextual theologies in recent years as helpful in dealing with received Lutheran notions, but the result is that the 'Samoanisation of the Gospel' is still riddled with theological problems of compromise and accommodation.

Pacific Islanders have become excellent imitators of imported European Christianity but have also found courage in recent years to address 'the split in ourselves'.

Professor Nokise named Luther's most constructive contribution being made around the theology of grace: complete, sufficient and free.

We are loved for who we **are** not what we do.

How we deal with God's grace is the major theological challenge for all our churches today.

Summary of comments/questions from the 12 'talanoa' groups immediately following the address

- Interest in the topic of 'grace' – Luther's use of the concept, the totality of God's grace, the implications of that for the contemporary Pacific, 'healthy, relational grace'.
- Revisiting the classic 'Gospel & Culture' questions: is culture or Gospel ever pure? Pre-missionary and post-missionary tensions. So-called 'Indigenous' and 'Christian' wisdoms. The help/hindrance of contextual theologies. The balance needed in the 'drua' (canoe) otherwise it will tip over.
- Concern about Luther's dualism as imprisonment in a Pacific which values relationality. The dangers of spirit/matter separation. Trinitarian relationality helps to shed light.
- The missionaries did their best: discuss!
- How can the material of such a conference be communicated at the 'grass roots'?
- The word 'reformulation' emerged as significant in the keynote and responses. How can the formulas of Luther's Reformation be reformulated by our contemporary Pacific Churches?

Revd Dr Val Ogden

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