

Reformation500 PTC – Fiji

Concluding Sermon – Bishop Jack Urame ELC-PNG

Grace and peace to you from God, the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Romans 1: 16 *“I am not ashamed of the Gospel because it is the power of the God for the salvation of everyone who believes in him.”*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

2017 marks a significant moment of the Christian Church around the world, therefore we have spent two days reflecting deeply on the reformation movement 500 years ago and on Luther, his theological ideas and approach and how the reformation movement affect the church and societies in those days but also more importantly their relevance to us and to our communities in our time and context.

History is gone but memories and legacies of the reformation remain to his day as witnesses of the man who feared no kings and powers of his time but stood on the scripture with a deep sense to seek the truth, committed his life, even to the extreme of putting his own life at risk, to reform the church.

When we look back, we thank God for the gift of Luther’s life, his works, his wisdom, his bravery, his theological insights, his rediscovery of the scripture, and his drive to understand the grace of God. Luther was a gifted man, whose reformation attempts changed the world forever in the history of Christianity.

So here we are today, as brothers and sisters of Oceania, celebrating together to commemorate the history of reformation. We look back with joy on the achievements but also the challenges and implications within the Christian Church. At the same time we are also deeply asking how the reformation movement affects us and also challenges the way we do our mission and theology in our Pacific context.

Luther was disturbed by things happening in the church and society that were not in agreement with the scripture. The scripture became the basis on which Luther stood and defended his teachings. The book of Romans became one of Luther’s drives to his approach to understand what God was saying and to bring the church into order from human teachings and ideas about God and humanity. In Romans

1:16 the Apostle Paul claims the Gospel as the center and must remain the basis of the church, our life and faith. It is the power of God for the salvation of humanity. Luther stood on the Gospel as the strength and drive of the reformation movement.

We are reminded again that we need to return to the basis of the scripture if we are searching for the truth and asking for the meaning of life. The Gospel is the message of God's love, forgiveness, reconciliation, healing and salvation. God's message for humanity offers us new hope and gives us courage and strength to take the journey of our faith seriously and move on, as Christ says, 'if you want to follow me deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me. The Gospel offers us with a new understanding of life, of God, of humanity and of our world.

500 years down the line the central message of the Gospel does not change, but the realities we are facing in our world today demand our attention to be more sensitive to the issues that are challenging our relationship with God and with our neighbors, as Christ points us to the basic principal of life: to love God and to love our neighbors.

The Gospel offers us the message of liberation. It empowers us to live in relationship with God and with our neighbors. But we must also admit that our relationship with God and with our neighbors is never perfect. We do face challenges in our lives, in our churches and in our communities and societies. Yet the message of liberation and empowerment gives us hope and courage to face our world with the realities affecting us, our faith and our church and mission today.

Luther was an instrument of God's mission and so we are also called to be witnesses of Christ and of the Gospel. We are an extension of God's mission in the world today. Therefore we have an obligation to extend this message of liberation and empowerment to our communities and societies.

We know our societies are not isolated from the global trends of development. Globalization has greatly affected us, our lifestyle and our values. Modernization has changed the way we live as pacific people, modern technology has great bearings on our human connectedness and interactions, new development trends have reshaped our pacific worldview and ways – our pacific ways of living together, sharing and caring for each other.

Globalization, modernization, modern technology, materialism, individualism capitalism and consumerism are like giant empires, which on the one hand bring change and connect us to the global community but on the other hand rob us of our traditional foundations and values and challenges our Christian values. Look around and see what is happening in our societies. We must admit that communal cohesion has declined, social interaction has declined, love and care for the old, the sick, the needy and for each other have declined. The sense of community and togetherness has declined. Respect and obedience to the old and the elders have declined.

In the face of change we are deeply affected but the message of liberation reminds us to understand who we are: we are God's children; we are God's pacific people. We have been called and liberated by the Gospel. And as the household of God and as God's Pacific people we are called to raise our pacific voice against all forms of negative forces confronting us and challenging the values of our societies, our church, our faith, our mission, our Christian principles and our cultural values on which we stand as God's pacific people.

We are called and reminded that we are church and we have an obligation not only to the people in our church communities but also in our wider societies in the region and in the world. We have seen and heard about people suffering from political, economic, social abuses and conflicts. We know our Melanesian brothers and sisters in West Papua are suffering from political suppression and struggling and searching for freedom. Their cries are not sufficiently heard and addressed by global communities. What can we do as church to collectively raise our prophetic voice?

There are other issues which enslave many people. Social disharmony, economic imbalance, political suppression, inequality, poverty, orphanage, human trafficking, violence and other forms of abuse are affecting thousands of people around the world. While some are enjoying life with joy and in comfort others are suffering and longing for freedom, peace and harmony.

In other parts of the Pacific Island countries giant global companies have ripped off our natural resources and left us with destruction, brokenness and emptiness, many of our forest are gone through massive logging, marine life has been threatened,

fresh waters have been polluted through mining and other development, fish have been fished out of our ocean, gold, copper and gas have been extracted out of our soil.

If development is not positive and not sustainable they are not beneficial and helpful but destructive. If development cannot liberate us and make us happy it only enslaves us further and disempowers us. Where do we stand as Christians and as Church in these realities our people and our societies are facing?

Therefore the Gospel of liberation and salvation must not be confined to the pulpits in our churches alone. The realities we are facing informs us that we are church, community of God's people, called to be witnesses of the Gospel of liberation and empowerment in the church as well as in public space to raise our prophetic voice against the negative forces which appear in different forms. They could be in the form of development, government policies, national and international structures, local and regional practices which enslave our people and disempower them, and in certain circumstances suppress them to the extreme of dehumanizing them.

As we reflect on the major themes of Reformation the notions of liberation and empowerment are, in my view, key themes for us, for our pacific people and for the global communities.

Someone said yesterday that we need to rediscover the vision and mission of the reformers. The context and time when the reformation took place was different. The political, social, religious and economic contexts which fueled the reformation was different but issues of religious disunity, heresies, false teachings, sickness, inequality, hunger, social discrepancies and suffering are not different than today.

Today our time and context is different but human suffering, religious disunity, environmental and ecological destruction, economic disparity and social disharmonies are far from over.

We are called to be witnesses of the Gospel and to raise our collective prophetic voice by denouncing evil and promoting good. We have been liberated and empowered to extend this message of hope to others so that others too can be liberated and be empowered to receive the fullness of life which God offers, as

Christ says, I have come that you may have life, and have it in its fullness. We are on the journey seeking for the fullness of life that cannot be found anywhere else but in and through Christ. As the Apostle Paul says, everything else is just a shadow of the reality, the reality is Christ. If Christ is in you and you are in Christ the union is complete. Then you have found the treasure, life in its fullness which begins with Christ. So let us go with the assurance from the Gospel that nothing from this world will take us away from the love of God when we are connected to Christ. And may the Holy Spirit lead us as we journey through under the grace of God to obtain the fullness of life in the Kingdom of the Father.

Brothers and sisters, Luther dropped the first stone in the ocean and created waves that never end, so let us continue to create waves as we journey through, and the waves will never end until Christ comes. Amen.

And the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.