

Partnership in the Gospel

A Report based on the Vision of the Archbishop of Melanesia

On Sunday 17 April 2016 more than 4000 people gathered at St Barnabas Cathedral Honiara in the Solomon Islands to witness the enthronement of Archbishop George Takeli as the sixth Archbishop of Anglican Church of Melanesia. It was at this enthronement that he set out his vision for the future of the church of Melanesia. In the last 18 months he has been working to establish many of those ideas.

I want in this report to reflect upon the key messages of that vision which Archbishop George Takeli has set out and the Church of Melanesia has begun trying to live out and implement.

“God is always present with us.”

Melanesian culture is pervaded by the realisation of the presence of God in all things. It is a culture immediately dependent on the land and sea to sustain the life of its people. When storms and cyclone come, as we have seen they often do, we have constantly seen how vulnerable these low-lying islands are, made still more vulnerable by climate change. We also see the resilience and courage of the people both in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu as they rebuild their lives after floods and cyclones and when forced to move whole villages and abandon islands due to rising sea levels. In our partnership with the Church of Melanesia we have much to learn from this closeness to creation- for we abandon our own stewardship of creation at our peril. But we also have much to learn about the presence of God in our daily lives- the gifts of God revealed in the food we eat, the water we drink, our homes providing shelter from the elements, the air we breathe and the many gifts of God we take for granted. The promise of God’s presence is, according to Archbishop George, a promise of hope for the future, even in times of deep fear.

“The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord”

Another lesson that we learn from the Church of Melanesia is that living the Gospel is a path of joy. It is joyful to be a disciple of Christ not a burden or an anxiety. In all aspects of the churches life we see that joy pervading the mission of the Church of Melanesia. We see it in laughter, in dancing, in Melanesian music, in welcome and generous hospitality and in community life. To share the life of the religious communities in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu is to experience struggle, and at times poverty, but never without profound joy. It is also to rediscover the spontaneous- a faith that comes from the heart. Notice the way that songs are often learnt by heart and the ritual of worship is not just the written word but the Word made flesh.

“God recommissions the church for mission”

The church of Melanesia has always been proud to be a missionary church. It celebrates Bishop Selwyn and of course Bishop Patteson from Exeter Diocese- and all those who left family and home to live the Gospel in the South Pacific. These were “missionaries not stationaries.” Its model of mission was a ship moving from island to island. And right from the beginning those called to become its evangelists whether priests or brothers or sisters or teachers and lay workers often had to let go of family and home and set out trusting in the Gospel. The Church of Melanesia is not ashamed of a Gospel that brought peace to the islands and overcame the fear of the evil spirits and the violence of tribal conflicts and head-hunting. It has always had a confidence in its missionary calling and has been confident to profess the new life that Christ brings. At Pentecost 2017 the Church of Melanesian relaunched A Decade of Evangelism and Renewal- with the desire to bring new believers to know Christ and to bring those who have fallen away back to Christ. It is a call to all to live in the light of Christ more faithfully. Archbishop George Takeli has challenged the church to build a renewed community of God’s people where faith is not simply a denominational allegiance but the Spirit which changes lives and builds God’s kingdom. The Church of Melanesia is a young and growing

church full of gifts and potential. Of course there will be pain and struggle as in the birth of a child but this is a mission which will demand both perseverance and the hope that comes from God.

“It is a vision of God. Mission work must begin with God.

Even in times of crisis or critical challenges, God is still in control. Archbishop George has emphasised the importance of prayer as the basis for all mission and ministry and the essence of all renewal in the church. You cannot do God’s work without God’s help. Again and again we are invited to return to God in prayer and faithful worship. Prayer is the secret of a closer walk with God. This renewal will also depend on the renewal of leadership. If leadership is renewed that allows for the whole church to be renewed. Leadership according to Archbishop George: “is not about seeking privileges and opportunities but is a sacred responsibility of service to the community from which we have been called.”

“The church must become self-supporting and self-reliant.”

The Church of Melanesia, the Archbishop argues must no longer depend on others for its finances and well-being but mature both spiritually and also in terms of its industry, its administration and planning, and its generation and use of finances. Archbishop George has insisted these things are also of God. The growth of a church will depend on wise management and planning of resources and priorities. The Melanesian Mission UK has a part to play in this growth, not stifling this independence but by being a faithful friend and partner of the Church of Melanesia in a relationship of equality and trust and the sharing of expertise and gifts.

“A church which works together with others.”

Archbishop George has stressed the importance of working together with others. He sees the different diocese within the Church of Melanesia not rivals dividing up of a cake but as partners in mission together working for the common good. To that end he has worked to bring a greater understanding between the dioceses and to establish a greater collegiality and bond of faith between the bishops of each diocese. But also he has worked for a closer relationship with NGOs and Mission Partners. The partnership with the Melanesian Mission UK is of vital importance and significance to him. He sees it as a reciprocal relationship in which we can learn from one another. This is particularly seen in the relationships that have grown through the visits to and from the religious communities in Melanesia to the UK and between schools. The Primary and Secondary School links and the active links with the religious communities especially the Melanesian Brotherhood, the Sisters of Melanesia, The Sisters of the Church and the Society of St Francis has been a source of real blessing and renewal both in UK and in Solomon Islands and beyond. Archbishop George is the chair of SICA the Solomon Island Christian Association and believes that unity between churches is also of vital importance

The stewards of creation

The more we learn about how climate change will impact on people and the environment, the more we see how people need to take action to reduce green-house gas emissions that are causing such destructive climate change. As Christians we are called to become the stewards and defenders of creation. The Church in the South Pacific has a vital prophetic role to play and the Church in the UK and the west must become advocates and witnesses to the threat our partners face. It is not the Solomon Islands that is causing the rising sea levels, it is the industrial western world but it is some of the poorest most vulnerable people in the world who are suffering the consequences. In the islands of the pacific we have seen rising sea levels, flooding, erosion and the disappearance of land and small islands, coral bleaching, changing tide patterns, unusual winds and currents and weather patterns, draught and lack of rain, and then increased and more violent cyclones and concentrated rainfall bringing flash-floods. The Church cannot remain passive. The decade of Evangelism and Renewal is about renewing our commitment to the gifts of creation and their stewardship. It is also about realising

that the way we live in one part of the world has a direct impact on the lives of others in other parts of the world.

Blessed are the Peacemakers

The Church has a vital role to play within the wider community as Solomon Islands faces its own divisions and conflicts. The Church of Melanesia is the messenger of a greater unity that comes through the forgiveness and example of Christ. Every Christian is called upon to be a messenger of that peace and to break down the hatred and animosity that divides tribes, islands, nations, faiths and cultures. The divisions that led to the ethnic tension are still often present under the surface. It is the call of every member of the church to show that we are first and foremost Christians. Who is my mother, my father, my brother my sister, my tribe, my wontok? The one who does the work of God.

These are the ideas and visions which Archbishop George Takeli has shared and begun implementing in his first 18 months of office. They are, I believe, not just of value to the Church of Melanesia but the whole world wide Anglican Communion and to us, partners in the Melanesian Mission UK

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