

Radical hospitality

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Pentecost + 7: Amos 8 1-10, Psalm 52, Colossians 1 15-23, Luke 10 38-42

This past week, Vicky and I have been at the UCA President's conference in Nadi, Fiji. I'd never visited the Pacific. Fiji exceeded my dreams; it's an enchanting, beautiful place, and the people are infectiously happy and kind. The conference title was *For the whole of Creation*. One of the primary issues it tackled was the global climate emergency. It was held in the Pacific as a sign of solidarity with the Uniting Church's partner churches in the Pacific – especially the Methodist Church of Fiji – but there were also delegates from the churches of Tonga, Tuvalu and Kiribati.

This very intensive four-day conference gave us an opportunity to listen carefully to each other's stories as fellow Christians. We learned how our Pacific family still struggles to become decolonised, both mentally and politically. But most particularly, we encountered at a very deep and personal level the grief caused by the double catastrophe of rising sea levels, and the pollution ravaging ocean, air, land and living creatures in the Pacific region – all casualties of our civilization's greedy culture of *more is better* – our relentless plundering of our children's future .

I want to tell you about Josefa, a minister from Tuvalu. Josefa told us his family's story of the rising water that we all know threatens Tuvalu right now. We know *of* it but not personally. Josefa gave us permission to share his story.

Josefa's ancestors raised a large mound on their farm, and on that mound, they built their family home. Josefa had just spoken on the phone with his brother who told him that the water has now come up to the mound. The unthinkable is staring

them in the face. The terrible sadness Josefa feels came home to me when he told us of a traditional family custom on Tuvalu. Every year, around Christmas time, families go to the cemetery together to visit their ancestors' graves. 'We show our love and respect for our parents, grandparents and ancestors by carefully tending their graves, but especially at this time. Then we all go back to our family home together and share a wonderful feast of thanksgiving for our family.'

At this point, Josefa fell silent. Then, almost gasping with the effort to speak, he asked, 'How can we do that any more? They're saying we'll have to leave our island soon and find somewhere else to live. But who would we be then? Who would we be without our island? We could no longer be the people of Tuvalu. If there is no Tuvalu, then we are no more.' The depth of Josefa's grief was overwhelming; I can't imagine losing my connection with everything my families have ever been; never able to go back to the place my story happened. That's death.

So what can we do? One of our keynote speakers was Rev James Bhagwan, the chair of the Pacific Council of Churches (PCC). James spoke with us about the Pacific churches' response to this tragedy – how they're developing a theology that can help care for people facing forced relocation. Will their forced migration be an Exile or an Exodus – a pathway to slavery or to some sort of freedom?

James outlined the evolving PCC theology; it's practical and pastoral. It includes the concept of *radical hospitality*: receiving such forced migrant communities with no strings attached; not demanding 'integration'; not demanding the loss of their sovereign identity! That is radical. He also spoke of the PCC's theology of accompaniment – if people just can't bring themselves to leave, some of us will go to stay with them – right to the end. This is an astounding demonstration of practical love – of the saying that *Justice is what love looks like in action*.

Before I left Adelaide, I'd prepared a sermon on today's Gospel – the story of Mary and Martha – having no idea how transformed I would be by this conference. Oddly enough, I'd read a news item before I left which said that young people won't come to church because we don't speak about the real issues of our time; issues like the climate fear which confronts their generation. That article, immediately followed by the conference have left me with no option but to preach a completely different sermon today; this one.

I've been driven away from in-house controversy of the Mary and Martha story, and directly into the path of the prophet Amos with his message that God calls on the wealthy and powerful to act with justice and mercy toward the poor and the defenceless.

Like all the eighth-century prophets, Amos preached about God's attitude to rich and powerful people when they become obsessed with material gain, and how that selfishness comes at such a terrible cost to others. As Amos puts it, they become people, *who trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land*. Today's Psalm echoes the prophets' demands for justice too. But have they been heard? The injustice they describe is still how the poor experience power today – the manipulative world of trade negotiations with corporations and governments who hold all the cards; and the Psalm tells how the poor experience the malignant deafness of economic neo-colonialism – deafness to their cries of pain, grief and need.

This is where God's people are called to step in and make a difference. And we do: ABM, Anglican Overseas Aid, Uniting World, Pacific Council of Churches and the agencies of other denominations are all critically important partners with the churches in our region and beyond. Through these agencies, we are almost always the first responders to suffering like Josefa's and his family on Tuvalu.

But I'm concerned that we don't do this in a set-and-forget

way; donate to an agency to express our commitment to compassion and justice, but rarely engage at a congregational level – or at a personal level. Probably we do, but no one else necessarily knows because we may be afraid of sounding party-political if we speak of our passion for justice. Isn't it a terrible travesty that people sometimes feel we can't openly express our grief at injustice to the poor – our opposition to the destruction our civilization is wreaking on Earth and our fellow creatures – without being accused of being political?

Some try to silence the truth about tragedies like Josefa's by 'politicising' them – accusing the victims and their supporters of some sort of subversive political motive. The Psalm calls out such people's *destroying slanders: tongues [which] cut deceitfully*. If you're ever in doubt, just read Amos, Hosea and Micah – or any of the prophets. They make it absolutely clear that being political is to be faithful, because justice will always be political.

God's prophetic communities must always let the truth about justice for the poor and the vulnerable ring out loud! Amos and the Psalmist tell us today to remember Josefa; remember Tuvalu, and be bold to speak out. Amen