

PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM

PACIFIC FORUM ECUMENICAL PRAYER SERVICE

ST. MONICA'S CATHEDRAL, CAIRNS, NORTH QUEENSLAND

SERMON

James Haire ¹

Readings: John 2: 13 – 22
Romans 12: 1 – 17

Text: Romans 12: 2a and 16a: (2a) “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds...(16a) Live in harmony with one another”. (“και μη συσχηματίζεσθε τω αιώνι (“age”) τουτω ...το αυτο εις αλληλους φρονουντες (“be in harmony of mind”))”)

Margaret Mead, the American anthropologist, while attending the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi in Kenya in 1975, and surveying the vast crowd (including a High Court judge from the Caribbean, a used-car salesman from Memphis, Tennessee and a bare-footed Kenyan tribesman, recently converted, who had just walked for three days to see what it was the whole thing was about), said: “You people are a sociological impossibility. You have absolutely nothing in common, except your extraordinary conviction that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world.”

We in the Pacific Islands are perhaps not such a sociological impossibility. However, it is true that for so much of this area there is the powerful conviction that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world, and therefore that, individually, and communally, we seek to live in his way.

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In a sense, therefore, it will be true that any discussions in the Pacific Islands Forum will always be discussions of Christian social ethics, and discussions of Gospel and culture.

So let us go to one of the hearts of that discussion for Christianity, Paul's *Letter to the Romans*. It is arguable that no document in Christian history has played a more influential part than this letter. One simply has to reflect on the pivotal impact of *Romans* on Augustine and the development of Western Christianity, on Luther and then on Calvin and Cranmer and the political, social and religious consequences of the Reformation, on Wesley and the emergence of the Evangelical Revival, on Karl Barth and his dominance of Twentieth Century Theology, and on the Second Vatican Council and the Renewal of the Roman Catholic Church. A primary impetus for Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Cranmer, Wesley, Barth, and the Members of Vatican II came from Paul's writings, particularly from *Romans*. This letter is thus central to Christian self-identity and self-understanding. It forms a useful basis for the exploration of the understanding of Christian community based on identification with God in Christ as it challenges the prevailing Graeco-Roman culture of status based on potentially violent concepts through the ethical sections of *Romans*, particularly Chapter 12.

Christianity was born in the midst of oppression. At its outset, it was a despised minority of a despised minority, the people of "the Way" within Judaism within the Roman Empire. Its documents were those of the oppressed. The same is true of Judaism as it developed in the first century CE, and of Islam as it developed in the Sixth and Seventh centuries CE. In this the faiths of the Abrahamic family bear commonality, despite that fact that they lay such emphasis on peaceful harmony (*shālôm*, *eirēnē* and *sālaam*). In general, this oppression was very public.

However, in three hundred years Christianity had become the official religion of the oppressor. Humanity has not done well in undergoing such a transformation from the oppressed to the dominator. We think of the Afrikaners as they were forced by the British north of the Vaal River into Tansvaal, and then oppressed others. We think of Israel after 1948, and especially after the *Yom Kippur* War, as an oppressed and diasporic community coming subsequently to dominate the Palestinians. We think of the Presbyterians of Northern Ireland (my own people), oppressed by the English and then dominating the indigenous Irish.

So Christianity was born in a milieu of political and social violence. The evidence which we have both from the New Testament and from non-Christian sources of the First Century C E point to the constant struggle of Christianity to survive in such a climate. Clearly that climate of violence and oppression also influenced the language and concept-construction of many parts of the New Testament. Clearly images of violence and oppression are found in the New Testament. Nevertheless, it is also very striking how early Christianity sought, against the odds, to transcend this violent world.

The Church in Rome was in the process of formation. It was formed of Christians of Jewish descent, and Christians of Gentile, or non-Jewish, descent. It would seem that the Christians of Jewish descent had very considerable economic power. They had, however, suffered political oppression. In 49CE they had been expelled from Rome by the Emperor Claudius, along with all the other Jews. On Claudius' death in 54CE, shortly before Paul wrote Romans, they had been allowed to return. The Gentile Christians had, on the other hand, much more political influence, although in all likelihood they were largely economically disadvantaged. They also probably had the numbers; they were in the majority. So here was the Church in Rome, a minority of the economically powerful and politically oppressed, and a majority of the poor, but politically correct. It was the perfect combination for social chaos, as it is in every situation where these factors exist. What probably existed was a collection of rather poor Gentile house-churches, and at least one rather grand synagogue, now converted into a Church building. However, did they meet together? Paul actually never calls them "the church" (*ecclesia*).² The church could therefore be understood as "the body of Christ", the Second or New Adam. It was to be a united, multi-ethnic, socially-diverse and theologically-varied body. It is a picture related to Christ, and also related to God's Spirit. A spirit was what God breathed into Adam's clay body in Genesis.

The picture of the church needs to be seen over against the social perceptions of First Century CE Roman society.

Let us look at that world.

First, in the world of Early Christianity, social groupings were based on kinship, ethnic issues, power, and politics. Kinship was the central factor

² He could, for example, have used the Jewish concept of "the temple"; there were two famous pillars at Solomon's Temple, named Jachin and Boaz (I Kings 7: 15-22).

of social organisation. The kinship group was the focus of individual loyalty, and had decisive influence over individual identity and self-awareness. The security of each individual was grounded in the community, sharing as they did common interests, values, and activities. Hence, the most basic unit of social awareness was not the individual. Individual consciousness was subordinate to social consciousness.³

Second, religion, like other social factors, was enmeshed in kinship and politics. Membership of a religious community was not necessarily based on religious relationships, but on bonds of kinship that gave structure to religious associations. Membership in religious groups was either involuntary or voluntary. Involuntary members belonged to a religion because, for example, they were born into a particular family. Voluntary membership in early Christianity stood in contrast to family-based religion. In the First Century C E the religion of voluntary members resulted in a newly-created kinship group.⁴ Although it appeared to be similar to, or to look like, any other kinship group, it was in fact a created or fictive kinship grouping. In Early Christianity, language of the natural kinship group, for example “household (of faith)”, was used for a created kinship group. Indeed, the struggle of the Christian community as a totality, for example in Rome, can be seen in relationship to these two types. It struggled as to which of these two types it in fact belonged.

Third, there is considerable evidence in the First Century C E within Graeco-Roman culture of intense expressions of emotion, through outbursts of anger, aggression, pugnacity, and indeed violence. Moreover, these appear to have been very public and socially acceptable.⁵

³ MALINA, B. J. *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981, 55-66; 60-64; MEEKS, W. A.. *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, 90-91. Cf. THEISSEN, G. *Social Reality and the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics and the World of the New Testament*. Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1992, 272 – 278.

⁴ THEISSEN, G. *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (edited and translated by John H Schutz). Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982, 27-40. Cf. ESLER, P. F. *The First Christians in their Social Worlds: Social-Scientific approaches to New Testament interpretation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994, 6 – 12.

⁵ PEARSON, L. *Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece*. Stanford: University Press, 1973, 193; WEDDERBURN, A. J. M. *The Reason for Romans (Studies of the New Testament and its World)*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988, 81-83. Cf. LOADER, W. R. G. *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels*. Grand Rapids (Michigan) and Cambridge (UK): Eerdmans, 2002, 177.

Fourth, in such an atmosphere, concern for honour and shame was significant. This was because honour determined social standing and was essential for social cooperation. Honour was the outward approval given to a group or an individual by others whose honour was not in question. The honour of an individual normally was dependent upon the outward approval given to one's group. On the other hand, people became shamed when they transgressed group standards or when they sought a social status to which public approval was not given. Honour was ascribed, for example, by birth into an honourable family, or by it being given or bestowed from honourable persons of power. It was acquired by outdoing others in social interchange. A person's sense of self-worth was therefore established by public reputation related to that person's associations rather than by a judgment of conscience.⁶

Over against these four factors outlined above, Paul summons Christians to new social roles. They are based on mercy, peaceable conduct and reconciliation in a culture where expressions of oppression and violence seem to have been normative. The call for transformation now means new expressions of group identity. No longer based on kinship or ethnicity, group identity nevertheless seeks to retain the intense cohesion of former groups. Paul's community members bind themselves together as one body in Christ. This metaphor is poignantly suitable in a society where self-awareness arises from group association rather than from individual worth. The ideals of honourable and shameless conduct are altered in that they are not primarily derived from society outside. Rather, enhanced honour for the community derives from its incorporation into its risen Lord. Patterns of social co-operation are modified as a result. A new communal identity as one body in Christ is thus reinforced. The social groupings see their identity as coming from beyond themselves. Their self-understanding and their life together are defined by the kindness or mercy of God and by the truthful harmony (or peace) which God gives. The other factors in the transformation include cohesiveness within the group based on an understanding of God's action from outside. For that reason, attitudes of peaceful harmony are central to the community's identity. Moreover, no other identity marker (ethnicity, gender, class, or status) may be accepted as absolute. Honour derives from the faith-life of the community, originating from beyond. The original groupings are transformed by the new ideal of a central awareness of their relationship with God.

⁶ MALINA, 27-48.

We thus see the radical way in which Paul took hold of Graeco-Roman categories of group identity, and then applied to them new metaphors, including that of the body of Christ, so as to create in them a totally new identity.

Kosuke Koyama, the Japanese theologian, once told of a car journey with a Hindu friend. On the road they saw on the road side a billboard proclaiming: "Campaign for Jesus." Koyama's Hindu friend remarked: "I thought Jesus campaigned for you! Isn't that what you should be telling the world?"

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In addition, throughout the ethical sections of *Romans*, attitudes to those *outside* the newly created Christian social groupings are to be the same as to those *within* them. There is to be no distinction. All are to be treated in the same way. This perception was totally new in much of Greco-

Roman society. We thus see the radical way in which Paul took hold of Greco-Roman categories of group identity, and then applied to them new metaphors, including that of the body of Christ, so as to create in them a totally new identity.

The contemporary reality of many parts of the world is one of deep oppression. Behind this lies the development of a new ideology which “legitimizes a culture of violence by invoking God arbitrarily to suit a particular agenda for aggression. As a result, insecurity, fear and anxiety characterize the lives of many people”.⁷ This culture of oppression manifests itself in many different ways. There is the structural violence of domineering or negligent governments in relation to their populations. Corruption and the abuse of power often manifest themselves in violence. In addition, there are often structural forms of traditional violence, mainly based in patriarchal societies. These result in gender discrimination, forced labour migration, discrimination against young people and those with disabilities, and discrimination based on race, caste, and class. Surrounding our very life is the violence against the environment.

We live in a deeply ambivalent age, an age of high technology and of mediaeval conflict. In this age we in the church are called to speak of, and to live out, God’s peace for us. We speak of the wonder of God’s grace, that is, we speak of the wonder of God’s condescension to us. Our Christian faith and life is built on the inexplicable will of God to be with, and for, humanity. The mystery is that the triune God chooses not to be God apart from, or separate from, humanity, but rather to make God’s very life intersect with our human life through Christ. The theological basis of all Christian life, then, is the wonder of God’s condescension, in the intentionality of God to be in solidarity with those who find their self-identity completely within themselves. Here is expressed the fact that God does not wish to be alone in celebrating the wonder of God’s inexpressible love for humanity. God in Christ calls into existence an earthly Body of His Son who is its heavenly Head, in order that humanity may responsively rejoice with God in the harmony and peace which God has established for creation.

We are called to a life of praise, the praise of God, which embraces all of our personal and social life, in all its practical, ethical, religious, political and intellectual aspects. It is a praise which stands counter-culture, over

⁷ KOBIA, S, quoted in World Council of Churches News Release entitled “Restating the Ecumenical Vision demands Conversion, says Kobia”, Geneva, 15/02/2005. Cf. BURTON, J. *Conflict: Resolution and Provention*. London: Macmillan Press, 1990, 1 – 2; 13 – 24.

against the idolatrous self-worship of individuals and even nations in our time. In our time especially we are called to stand against that self-worship, and to stand for the true praise of God, the praise of all our life, in public and in private. This is the heart of the Christian faith.

At the beginning of 2001, I was the first foreigner permitted to travel through the Moluccas in Indonesia, after the violence, because I had worked there for many years. I preached one Sunday at a makeshift camp for internally displaced people. They were deeply grateful to the Australian government and people for the assistance given to them. Most of them I knew; many I had baptised in years gone by; some I had confirmed. All were traumatised by events so gruesome. Afterwards some Muslim acquaintances of mine joined us from nearby. Both Christians and Muslims had been engaged in atrocities. We talked of burnt homes, ruined schools, and desecrated churches and mosques. I remarked how amazed I was that both sides were meeting together so soon.

This Pauline vision of Christian community is also eschatological in nature. It pictures the end of time as now already beginning to be operative. One of the great leaders of the ecumenical movement, Archbishop William Temple, served as Archbishop of Canterbury for only two years from 1942 to 1944. When he arrived in Canterbury, he was already ill. One of his lasting images was that of the Christian with bi-focal lenses, as bi-focal spectacles were beginning to be used at that time. In his writings he says that we should look through the top part of our glasses to see the world as God intends it to be. With the bottom of our lenses we see the world as it actually is. With the top part of our spectacles, as it were, we see a community of peace and harmony. With the lower part of our spectacles, we observe the world as it is. Although we daily look at reality through the lower part, we must live as if the upper part is reality too. In the church, we have to model what fully harmonious and peaceful communities are. For Christians, it is not just *what* we do, but *how* we do *what* we do that is important. The ways in which we live need to express this שלום (*shālôm*).

At Roslyn, near Edinburgh, there is the famous statue of Reconciliation. It depicts two human beings, one embracing the other. You cannot see the difference between the two as you walk around the statue, until finally you notice in the hands of the outer of the two, the one embracing humanity has the marks of the nails.

How are we to live out this peace in this region?

Much in the processes of our democratic society depends on confrontation, adversarial stances, competition, and symbolic conflict. Much of this is predicated on the search for truth, and the avoidance of corruption. The processes of our representative parliamentary democracies demand confrontation and adversarial stances, however benignly they are carried out. The legal system cannot function without confrontation, in its inexorable pursuit of truth.

However, we must face the fact that the requirements of the processes of our democracy can so easily spill over into the content of our democracy. Confrontation and adversarial stances – the quite legitimate servants of our democracy – can become its master.

Let us go back to Paul. Paul calls us to peace, to *shalom*, to a life where our identity comes from beyond, from Christ. Christ Himself is our peace, for God in Christ creates a new humanity. Christ is not only the Son of God; He is also, in the seventeenth-century English translation of Martin Luther, *the Proper Man*. In today's language we would say that Christ is also the picture of humanity as God intended humanity to be to live in perfect confidence in God, and in perfect harmony with God's intent.

Harmony within us. Harmony in our region, harmony internationally.

Harmony within each one of us. God in Christ has created us to share in this new humanity. God has given us a new identity, a new harmony with God's very self, and thus a new human community one with another. Do you as representatives of Pacific nations know that harmony? Yet that identity in Christ, that harmony with God can make it all possible, indeed energising. Popular polls in the media (even with very doubtful research methodologies) often place politicians pretty far down the list, along with journalists and used-car salespersons! (And, may I add, the clergy in recent times have been far from the top of the list!) However, we all know that that is not the whole story. People actually have very high aspirations for their parliaments. Maybe that is why at times they become disappointed. May each of you have lives of true harmony, as you seek to have your identity in Christ reinvigorated, and as you seek to live in harmony with God.

Harmony regionally and internationally. A remarkable multi-cultural, multi-linguistic, multi-religious society has developed in our region. There are pains. There are those who are marginalised. Our identity in Christ calls us to share that harmony throughout our region, across the

world. In our time it is not easy. No one but a fool would imagine that it is. At times it is important to be sceptical. But we must not become cynical. If we in this region can be an example of harmony, and can demonstrate that style of ours to our neighbours, then that fact alone can have a vast impact internationally. It comes, first of all, by being secure in ourselves.

Therefore, a number of things are incumbent upon us.

First, we need to be aware that creating societies of harmony means creating attitudes of harmony towards those *outside* which are the same as to those who are *within* the faith-community.⁸

Second, the communal nature of expressing theology calls Christians in particular to advance, at all opportunities, the eight goals of the Millennial Declaration (MDG) of the United Nations⁹.

Third, this way of communal harmony is necessary in the ways in which the churches in our region live their lives. Consensus decision-making, mutual celebration, and interest in others' rituals and festivities are important in the way of being Christian. This is lived, un-self-conscious, Pacific theology.

Fourth, truth can be communicated without aggression. Therefore, the ecumenical movement in the Pacific, in and of itself, as it brings the churches together, is central to the expression of a Pacific theology of harmony for all.

Twenty years ago I took part one Saturday afternoon in a march in Northern Ireland of the Peace People, the group founded by two women, Betty Williams and Miréad Corrigan, both later to go on to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. We walked through both Catholic and Protestant areas, trying to pull the community together. As a Protestant minister I walked alongside a colleague from the university where we had been lecturing, who had become a Catholic leader. Protestant young people were hurling abuse and rotten fruit at me for consorting with a Catholic.

⁸ See, for example from a Muslim perspective, H. TARMIDI TAHER. *Aspiring for the Middle Path: Religious Harmony in Indonesia*. Jakarta: Center for the Study of Islam and Society (CENSIS), 1997; MUHAMAD ALI. *Teologi Pluralis-Multikultural: Menghargai Kemajemukan Menjalin Kebersamaan*. Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2003; H. M. OASIM MATHAR, ED. *Sejarah, Teologi dan Etika Agama*. Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Interfidei/Dian, 2003.

⁹ See http://www.un.org/millennium_goals/

A person rushed out of a Catholic church wielding a great crucifix with which they hit my Catholic friend over the head, questioning whether his parents had been married at the time of his birth. He fell. I asked him if he would like to sit down for a few minutes in a shop door. Although in his seventies, he looked at me with steely eyes. “James”, he said, “there’s a handkerchief in my pocket. Get it out and clean up my head, and on we go, arm in arm. If we give up at this point, there will be no harmony”.

As you go home each night, can you ask yourself two questions: Am I at peace with God? And, what this day have I done to advance the peace, the harmony of this region, of the world? May God richly bless each one of you!