

## **Rev Dr Hedley Fihaki**

### **ACC National Chair**

**Sermon preached at the 2018 ACC Conference  
Holy Communion service 19<sup>th</sup> September.**

**Theme: Costly Discipleship**

**Bible reading:** *Mark 9: 30-37*

30 They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, 31 because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” 32 But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it. 33 They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” 34 But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

35 Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”

36 He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, 37 “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

**Discipleship is a costly affair.** It cost God his Son.

Last week’s reading Jesus taught his disciples that the Son of man ‘must’ suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he ‘must’ be killed and after three days rise again’ (Mark 8: 31).

Keyword: ‘must’. Not maybe, but ‘must’.

Jesus ‘must’ suffer; he ‘must’ be rejected, he ‘must’ be killed.

And, if Jesus ‘must’ suffer, and ‘must’ be rejected and ‘must’ be killed, then, we as his disciples ‘must’ not expect anything less.

To expect anything less is not Christian discipleship.

It is no wonder why Peter said to Jesus as recorded in Matthew’s gospel, ‘No way Lord. This must never happen to you’.

What Peter actually meant was ‘No way Lord, this aint gonna happen to me’. Yes, it may happen to you, but it certainly ain’t gonna happen to me’. So, good luck with that.

And, so Jesus in his normal therapeutic, pastorally caring and very sensitive way says:

“Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

When ever we too try and remove costly discipleship or the cross from what it means to be a Christian, then, we too must be prepared to hear Christ's strong words of rebuke, ‘Get behind me, Satan. You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.

I'm sure we have all experienced being rejected and being marginalised and victimised within the Church.

Of course, we expect to be rejected and victimised in the ‘world’, but when it is coming from *within* our Church, that is a little harder to take and to accept.

It does highlight the fact that the church is no longer in the world as a counter cultural entity, but that the world is now fully in the church. There is now no longer any difference between the church and the world.

The Uniting Church has lost its saltiness; its effectiveness to proclaim the truth of the gospel.

If you are being rejected, marginalised and victimised within the church and in the world, please know and understand, that this is our normal (not abnormal) path of discipleship for those who confess sole loyalty to Jesus Christ as the living head of the Church.

*1 Peter 4: 12-14*, one of my favourite passages of scripture explains the situation well in this way:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

When we understand and appreciate all that Christ has done for us in terms of the way of the cross, then, we can truly feel the blessing that comes in participating in the sufferings of Christ.

If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed (not cursed), for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

Quite a number of our ministers have been receiving formal complaints against them for posts on Facebook, for comments made at public ACC meetings, complaints for calling special meetings, and also complaints from congregational members because their congregations have joined the ACC. Some during congregational meetings have asked their minister ‘when they are going to vacate their church manse?’ and some have been reminded of who pays their stipend; some members have just been plain rude and offensive to their ministers.

### **How should we respond?**

What does Paul say? ‘Suck it up you snow flake’!

No, Paul doesn’t say that. But, I can imagine Paul saying that.

What does Paul say? ‘Rejoice’!

Don’t get angry or get grumpy, but ‘rejoice’. Why? Because you are participating in the ‘suffering of Christ’.

Yesterday we made a very significant decision to change our name and our status from ‘Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the Uniting Church in Australia’ to ‘Assembly of Confessing Congregations OF the Uniting Church in Australia.

What we decided was no small thing. We attempted to make a similar change a few years ago in Adelaide, but the time wasn’t quite right. But, now we have made this significant change.

This is not just a matter of semantics. Words are very important, and how we use our words. By making this seemingly ‘small’ change in ‘status’ from ‘within’ to ‘OF’ the Uniting Church in Australia, we are further strengthening our resolve and our commitment to be the distinct and proper Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia.

And, those congregations that align themselves with this Assembly shall be known as ‘Confessing Congregations’; congregations that confess their sole loyalty to Jesus Christ as the living head of the Church.

And, we should prepare ourselves for more ‘fiery ordeals’, not less, but more. And, when these fiery ordeals come our way, ‘don’t be surprised as if something strange were happening to you.

Instead, rejoice because we have been counted blessed to share in the blessing of the sufferings of Christ.

It is important to understand the decision that we have also just made is not simply a ‘standing aside’ as if it is simply a ‘passive’ action. We are not just standing aside, but we are making a commitment to ‘move forward’.

And, we must now move forward, not just stand still.

### **Our motto:**

**Confessing the Lord Jesus Christ, Proclaiming the truth, Renewing the Church.**

## How do we renew the church?

Our reading this morning points to the importance of ‘teaching’ the gospel. It is also highlights ‘how’ we are to teach the gospel.

Three things we learn from Jesus.

First, find a quiet place to teach your disciples so that you are focused on your task of teaching. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were. Why? Because he was teaching his disciples.

There is a lot of noise in the world; many voices competing for our attention. Finding an appropriate place to teach is essential.

Second, our posture for teaching is important.

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” *Mark 9: 35*

Keyword: ‘sitting down’.

Sometimes we bypass these seemingly unimportant words, but they highlight our method for teaching; ‘how to be a servant of all’. Jesus who is Lord of Lords and King of Kings does not consider it too small a thing to ‘sit down’ so that we may be at his ‘level’.

In our Tongan culture, if you are in the presence of the King of Tonga your head cannot be higher than the Kings head. That is why we must always be bowing or sitting down in the presence of our king so that our head is never higher than his.

Jesus, however, who is Lord of Lords and King of Kings sits down so that his head is on the same levels as ours. In this way he is not simply teaching his disciples about humility and what it means to be a servant of all, he is also putting his words into practice.

Finally, as has been highlighted a number of times during our conference, the UCA is dying. We have lost many, many of our young families and our children.

The UCA has about 2075 congregations. Of those 2075 congregations, 50% have no children. Another 25% have between 1-9 children. That is, 75% of all our congregations have been 0-9 children.

How we do we get children back into our church?

## Well what does Jesus do?

He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

*Mark 9: 36-37*

Key words: he took a little child; He (strategically) placed them among them; taking the child in his arms (embracing the child).

That is our method. That is the how.

1. Find a quiet place to teach so that you are very focused on your task of teaching.
2. Sit down – be at the same level; don’t speak down to your students.
3. Place children among you and teach them the good news about the Christ.

Noting, preaching the good news involves teaching the bad news as well.

The YES of the gospel goes together with the ‘NO’ of the gospel.

The love of God goes together with the judgements of God.

The sufferings and the rejections of Christ goes together with the resurrection of Christ. This is why in the Basis of Union, Jesus is referred to as the ‘Risen Crucified one’.

We must always live within these two poles.

Lesslie Newbigin put it in this way:

All true thinking about this, as about every matter, must be held within the magnetic field set up between these two poles; the amazing grace of God and the appalling sin of the world.

To live in this magnetic field is to live in an atmosphere which is charged with power, tingling, as it were, with electricity. One is always in the (humanly speaking) impossible position of knowing that one is – along with all others – at the same time the enemy of God and the beloved child of God.

To live in this charged field of force is always at the same time supremely demanding and supremely affirming.

But we are always tempted to slacken the tension by drawing away from one or other of the two poles.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*: SPCK Classic (Kindle Location 3356). SPCK. Kindle Edition.

Our temptation as we continue our journey as the Assembly of Confessing Congregations 'OF' the Uniting Church in Australia will be to slacken the tension by trying to draw away from the cross of Christ.

But, we must resist this temptation so that we can continue to 'live within this magnetic field' in this atmosphere that is charged with power, but not just any power, but in and through the power of the Holy Spirit the One who will renew His Church.

And, now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen.

*Jude 24-25*