

Reflection on GA21 – Empowering Generations

Acts 27:39-44

Last week, I attended the GA21. The online meeting was held for two days to deal with the most urgent issues, such as reports from the council of assembly, the Book of Order, and the *Working Together* (Te Mahi I Te Roopu Mahi), to name a few. In April next year, other meetings are scheduled, which we hope to be physical meetings. My reflection for today is mostly based on the report from *Working Together*. It is one of the workgroups in the Council of Assembly to discern a strategic direction for the Church. It included the reflection on the nature and role of the structures in resourcing and empowering presbyteries and the church as a whole. When I read the report from *Working Together*, I couldn't help but see the same things that we endeavour to achieve in GPP. The report begins with the Summary Statement as follows:

“The world is changing. The Church is changing. Some things are falling, and some things are rising. It is important to recognise what is going on and talk about it. Our structures are important, but they are not what is most important. It is important that our structures exist to serve and resource those who are called by God to follow Jesus and participate in the Spirit's ministry of love to the world. It is important that we cultivate enabling structures. But it is most important to consider where and how we focus the resources of the PCANZ in order to empower our people to embody the gospel of Jesus Christ in their everyday lives...”

Then the report continues with a scripture reading which is Acts 27:39-44. The following is an excerpt from the report, which I think is relevant to our current situation.

(An excerpt from the report of *Working Together* in GA2021 White Book in Section D1 49-50)

2. Context

It is felt that it is important for the Church to do some truth-telling in order to face into our current situation and discern God's hope-filled future for us in an open and honest way.

The truth is (and we all know it!) that the Church is in a challenging season!

a) the vessel and the storm

A nautical story in the New Testament caught our imagination when thinking about our context and what God might be calling us to in our future.

At the beginning of our day together, the task group spent time using the spiritual practise of *Lectio Divina* with the last verses of a shipwreck story in the book of Acts.

Acts 27:39-44 tells the story of Paul, under arrest and on his way to Rome for trial and caught up in a great storm. A messenger from God tells him that while all on the boat will survive, the boat itself will be lost.

As we dwelt in this piece of scripture through multiple readings of it, we paid attention to a word or phrase that caught our attention. Different members of the task group recognised the following:

- - Fear of the experience and loss of control.
- - The crisis of being lost in a storm, not recognising the land in front of them. The hope was to bring the boat that had carried them for 14 days safely to shore.
- - In order to have a future, they had to let go of all that held them steady. In the middle of the aiming for the shore, they needed to cut the anchors and ropes, which were holding them in place and giving them a relative sense of safety.
- - What had carried them to that place thus far was no longer usable in its old form, but it provided a means to move on to something new and life-giving in an unfamiliar land. The boat broke up, they had to leave it behind, but some people were carried ashore safely on pieces of the wreckage.
- - Grace in the midst of the crisis. The centurion took charge and offered a plan, and became an agent of God's mercy and intent.
- - God was in control – ‘not our ways but your ways’ [Isaiah 55:8-9].
- - The experience of peace. There was no loss of life.
- - There was a way through for everyone. However, it wasn't obvious until they were

fully engaged in the crisis. We were reminded of a story known as *The Samoan Crisis* from 1887 to 1889, which was a standoff between the United States and the German Empire (monitored by the British) over who would control the Samoan Islands. That chapter of the standoff ended when the 1889 Apia cyclone came. Counterintuitively, the British ship left the shelter of the harbour and survived the storm out at sea. Whereas the United States and German ships, choosing to stay in what they perceived to be a safe harbour, were destroyed.

- - 'We'll be ok if we cling to what steadies us.' The bow of the boat becoming stuck on the sand bar gave the impression of security. Meanwhile, behind them, the ship was breaking up!
- - A recognition that clinging to what has been leaves us not going anywhere!
- - The interruption of our ideas of the journey. God is present in the changes and in the way things subsequently unfold, but it isn't always easy to see.

- Something new unfolded for them out of the crisis, and grace abounded. The next chapter of Acts indicates that the place where they found themselves lost actually had a name – Malta. The locals in Malta provided kindness and care to those who were shipwrecked.

Without the bold action of cutting free the anchors and ropes holding the rudder, setting the sails for a strip of land they did not recognise, and eventually abandoning the very ship that had carried them so far, the people would have perished.

We wonder if this story offers us some helpful metaphors with which to explore how we negotiate the challenging season that is upon us in the Church.

It could be said that God's plan is for us to make it to shore, but not in the way we once thought it ought to be done.

*We might need to find our courage, cut the anchors and ropes, and trust ourselves to the mercy of the wind and the sea.**

Here I only quoted the beginning part of the report. The report concludes that they will explore more about 'team of teams' strategic model of which emphasises are on enabling, releasing,

and resourcing in a team of teams. The report was written from a national church point of view. In our context, the passage tells us something significant too. Presently we are in the midst of restructuring. It is not something new – it would have happened much before or it will happen any time soon. For today, I will not explain the chosen reading in Acts, or ask you to change something. But what I'd like to ask you is that to contemplate Acts 27:39-44 over the week and come back next Sunday with your reflections and prayers. We'll continue this conversation next Sunday. May God help us contemplate the metaphor of the shipwreck and allow us to be brave enough to move forward, for the future can only be found in God's kingdom, nowhere else. Amen.