

Reflection on Mission Plan workshop at Gisborne, 17 October 2021

Lord God, may your word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

John 21:1-14

Normal vs new normal

We had *Mission Plan Workshop* last week. It was a two-day workshop, and a good number of people attended. People enjoyed it, and we shared a lot of ideas and opinions based on John 21:1-14. The reflection is based on what we explored during the workshop. It has three parts: things that are normal so far, things that will be new normal from now on, and beyond.

Normal

During the workshop, the catchiest words in John 21:1-14 were Peter's saying, "I'm going fishing." Peter got through many things with Jesus, observed many miracles, witnessed the trial, crucifixion and resurrection. He also received the Holy Spirit with others from the risen Lord. After all these, however, what he could do was return to his hometown and go fishing. Jesus, whom they had known, was gone for good. They didn't understand what it meant to live with the Holy Spirit. They were tired and disappointed. They wanted to go back home – to normal life. As fishermen, fishing was their normal, which would give them comfort, or familiarity, or feelings of safety. Yet they couldn't catch fish all night long. And there stood Jesus. His call to them was to go back out and try again. He gave them instructions as to the next step. He told them to put the nets out on the right side of the boat. And they followed his instructions.

What makes us amazed is that the disciples did not know who he was at first. Even so, they went back out. We never know what made them cast the net again if it was out of their desperation for a catch, a desire for success, a sense of the specialness of the man calling them to return to their task, or something else. Whatever it was, they ventured back out and found huge success. Their nets were overflowing. They caught 153 fish, meaning that many were caught. They began with normal, and they were about to see new normal.

New Normal

Now the man who instructed them what to do even prepared breakfast for them. They had breakfast with the man whom they now recognized as Jesus. It is a kind of the Lord's supper event despite the lack of wine and no involvement of fish in the Eucharistic celebration. Yet it was at this meal that they received a recommissioning from the Lord. They were reminded who they were and what they were originally called to be. They were challenged to get back in the boat and try again - in more ways than one.

This story is very similar to one in the Gospel of Luke. In Luke 5:1-11, it was a call story when Jesus called the first disciples. Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake. He got into one of the boats belonging to Simon, who was called Peter later. While the story in Luke is rightly called a commissioning story, this appearance to the disciples in John is not only another resurrection appearance story, but also a recommissioning story. Here recommissioning is to restart the work for the call of Jesus by putting our nets back into the sea even though we are tired and had no success. It means knocking on another door even though we may expect that no one answers. Normal in the world tells us to stop trying what we have been doing. When the world tells us that it's not going to work, we still try because we now live in new normal because we are no longer catching fish but catching people!

In our story time, the story "*Storm Whale*" seems not related to our theme today – 'normal vs new normal.' The question – "why did *Noi* send the whale back to the sea?" and the answer "because that's the only way to make the whale live" seem even more distant from the theme. The whale belongs to the sea, and the boy lives in the land. That's that! But it's only one of many ways of understanding things. In the story, the boy wanted to keep the whale when it was stranded. While not knowing what to do, the boy did his best from his point of view. He began to think of the whale as a friend. In the end, with the father's help, the boy took the whale back to the sea where it belonged. It was hard to say goodbye, but that's the only way to make the whale live. Previously, *Noi* didn't think much about the storm and the life of the whale in the sea. He even tried to keep the whale at home and read the book. For him, that was normal as friends. Now he learns new normal in that he will love the whale continually even though he won't see it as he wishes. Friendship doesn't need possessing the other. New normal allows the boy to grow and see things from a higher perspective of life.

Presently the normal as the church tells us that we need many things – many young families, many resources, money for mission and for maintaining buildings. Being equipped with these things have been normal so far. But in a changing environment, scarcity of resources, aging, or old buildings of the church become new normal. New normal requires seeing and behaving differently. Life in the new normal is in need of creativity that allows us to think outside of the box. Normal or new normal alike, our duty to love our neighbour as ourselves remains the same as before. It still calls for casting the net to the right side of the boat without being afraid of failure. We know the instruction comes from the one who laid down his life for us from love – love that has no fear even for death. Amen.