

## ***Kuo Fonua e Hakau* (The Reef is Land): A Tongan Concept of Justice toward Children in Relation to the Words of Jesus in Luke 18:17**

*Tenā koutou tenā tātou katoa, Ta lofa lava, Bula vinaka, Malo e lelei*, and warm Pacific greetings. The topic of my presentation '*Kuo Fonua e Hakau*', meaning, 'The reef is Land'. *Hakau* (reef) on one hand could metaphorically refer to youthfulness like the early stage of it process to become a land space. *Fonua* on the other hand refers to an inhabited place or land space where the inhabitants live and cultivate. This Tongan word '*fonua*' has a parallel connotation among some of the Oceania languages. For instance, in Maori the word for *fonua* (land) is *whenua* (land, placenta), in Fijian is '*vanua*' (land), and in Samoan is *fanua* (land, placenta). Their meanings are closely related and they seem to refer to an inhabited place or space. By using this concept *Kuo fonua e hakau* depicts the uniqueness of '*hakau*' (reef) as a living and an inhabited place or space. Evidently, reef is both a living and an inhabited place for hundreds of sea creatures. Reef is also at the same time an inhabited place for the livelihood of hundreds of the inhabitants of Oceania. It means that *fonua* does not necessarily refer to dry land only but it also refers to any place that could provide shelter, security, and nourishment.

*Fonua* has four meanings in Tongan. Firstly, it refers to the mother's womb where a baby is developed, protected, sheltered, and nourished. Secondly, it refers to the landscape where people would live, be protected, and be nourished. Thirdly, it refers to the grave where the dead are sheltered, protected, and nourished. Fourthly, it refers to people that inhabit the land. We have a Tongan saying, "*Fonua pe tangata*", meaning "land is people". These understandings of land (*fonua*) seem to identify *fonua* as a place of protection, shelter and nourishment. Therefore, by using this concept *Kuo fonua e hakau* emphasises the importance and uniqueness of reef as a metaphor for children as the *fonua*, "*Fonua pe tangata*". If people is land, then children who is part of the people is a vital part of the structure. On this presentation, I would like to use this concept to identify and explore the uniqueness and value of children as oppose to the way they are perceived and treated in our society and the world.

We can't wait to value our children in the light of their future like the way we perceive the reef and its natural process but rather value it now for they are the *fonua* (land) now. This concept is apparently contrary to the traditional Tongan concept of '*Hakau e lolotonga ko e fonua e kaha'u*', meaning, 'Reef of today is land of the future.' This traditional concept seems to make assumption that the reef can only be important and valued when it becomes an inhabited land or an island. The concept that develop herein tend to value children as *fonua* (land) now rather than something of the future. There are four components that I would like to emphasise the significance of children and they might highlight some of the injustices that they face. Firstly, Children as *fonua* are not worthless, secondly, children as *fonua* are vulnerable, thirdly, children as *fonua* are connected beings. Finally, I will use the words of Jesus in Luke 18:16-17 to verify my position in fighting against the injustice that impose upon children. I have to admit that I am not an expert in the areas of childhood education or the social issues that our children face like child poverty and child abuse. However, the intention of my presentation is to trigger conversation and also to raise awareness to the reality of the injustice that children confront in our society.

## Children as *Fonua* are not Worthless

Children are not worthless for they are resourceful beings. They have the raw materials to be nourished for building up of families, communities, and nations. They obviously need support and understanding in the early stage of their journey in order for those resources to be protected and produced. I asked my wife, who is a pre-school teacher of her view of children. She responded that children do have resources for their progress and human development but they need to be cherished and nourished in order for these resources to flourish and be productive. The word “nourish” means to “build up, strengthen, develop and sharpen” and “cherish” means to “treasure, value, protect, and celebrate.” Children are needed to be nourished and cherished in order for the natural resources they obtain and retain in the early stage of their journey to develop and multiply. In the curriculum book that use by pre-schools and their staff to guide their daily operation calls *Te Whariki*, it states, “Each child learns in his or her own way. The curriculum builds on a child’s current needs, strengths, and interests by allowing children choices and by encouraging them to take responsibility for their learning.” (*Te Whariki*, p. 20) From this statement, children do have resources for their learning. Children are not lacking of mental, physical, and spiritual resources but they need support, understanding, and guidance. Furthermore, they need those resources to be valued and uphold for they are helping for the development of their personal and cultural identities.

For us who are parents, we notice that whenever we ignore our children on their excitement to show us their achievements they immediately feel let down and even pessimistic about themselves. In addition, they feel that we are not interested on their resourcefulness. Furthermore, they think that their achievement is not good enough to be acknowledged and celebrated. Such reaction is absolutely discouraging and disempowering children. Children deserve to be recognised that they have natural resources for their human development. However, in many circumstances those resources are ignored and even undermined.

This is the case in most situations. Children are viewed as ignorant and narrow mind. Usually, they are invisible in many conversation and decision making for they are regarded as unwise and inexperience. For instance, when adults are talking and suddenly a child joins in. That child would obviously be told off for being interrupted (in Tongan “*Kau-talanoa*”). That child is seen as interruption because he/ she is not wise or experience enough to be part of the conversation. Generally, in many cultural contexts, children are viewed as silly, dump headed, crazy, lazy, and cunning. These negative attitudes are man-made, aiming to confine children in an inferior place in the family social structure. This kind of attitude will disempower children from their resourcefulness. Helen Morton on her book entitled, *Becoming Tongan*, claims that the misbehaving of children in their social life is to do with putting down words that they hear from their parents and adult members of the community. (Morton, p.2) Morton states, “These are negatively valued characteristics, the most commonly mentioned being that children are *vale* and *pau’u* (naughty, mischievous)”. (Morton, p.72) Children deserve to be treated with love and understanding. They need to be cherished in order for their resourcefulness to flourish, which will definitely build their confidence and their human development. When people are respected as they are they will not only feel worthy but they will also feel confidence in what they do. That would be the same reaction that children expect their society to observe them. They want to be seen as resourceful as other age groups in their community.

The resources that children obtain are from their surroundings like families, community (*kāinga*), church, and nation. Furthermore, those resources will somehow shape their identity and their values. The traditional understanding of home as the first institution for children's learning indicates the importance of parenting. Parents are the first teachers to equip and cherish children's mental, physical, and spiritual development. Kent & Barbara Hughes in the book entitled, *Common Sense Parenting*, remarks, "Parents, like archers, launch their children into the future, aiming toward a distant target. Some parents take clear aim, and their arrows are well directed toward their future mark. But other child arrows are fired from unsteady bows, parents who are, at best, ambivalent about where they came from and unsure of their aim. Their arrows waver and falter, then finally succumb to gravity with no mark in sight. They tragically prove the adage "If you aim at nothing, you'll surely hit it." (Hughes, p. 4) It is the role of parents together with the kinship (*kāinga/ ainga*) to ensure that children's resourcefulness is protected, supported, and cherished in order to flourish and vibrant.

### **Children as *Fonua* are Vulnerable**

It may be true that children are resourcefulness but they are at the same time are vulnerable members of the society. They are vulnerable just the same as the reef. I mentioned on my abstract the nature of vulnerability that the reef encounter when France had their nuclear test in *Mururoa* atoll in *Tahiti* between 1966 and 1996. The coral reef died together with the living sea creatures that they were depending on the reef for security, shelter, and sustenance. Most recently, marine scientists discovered that part of the Great Barrier Reef in Australia are dying due to the increase of global warming and climate change. I am sure the treatment of the Pacific Ocean by powerful nations as a rubbish dump of their toxic waste have a detrimental impact on most of coral reefs of Oceania. Reef are vulnerable just as children and they suffered in a great deal because of negligence and exploitation. Children are vulnerable because they are weak, powerless, and defenceless.

Children are victims of sexual and physical abuse because they are powerless to defend themselves. It is a horrible experience to see so many children are suffered of abuse in their own homes and under the care of their parents and care-givers. *Right to Life New Zealand* in their recent report declares that New Zealand, which has a population of 4.47 million, has one of the highest rate of child abuse in the developed world. It also has one of the worst rates of death by maltreatment within the family. New Zealand Police reported that they respond to one "family violence" call every seven minutes. They also reported that in 60% of domestic violence cases, children are also being abused and indications are that in a similar percentage of child abuse. There were major cases that the media reported about the horror of child abuse. We remember today those children who suffered appalling abuse before they were killed. These children were Lily Bing, Nia Glassie, Mikara Riti, and the three months old twins, Chris and Cru Kahui, most recently was the cruel death of Moko Rangitoheriri, just to name a few. *Right to Life New Zealand* reported that every year twelve children die from appalling physical and sexual abuse. Their names are engraved on our minds and maybe we never forget these beautiful children and at the same reminds us the shame of their death.

Children are victims of exploitation as well as of violence when they are still in the womb of their mothers. If the mother's womb is *fonua*, a place of security, shelter, and nourishment then why so many lives have been exploited and violated in the womb of mothers. I have to

admit that I am neither a medical profession nor a person who have any experience on mid-wife but I am a professional carer who cares for the life of every human being. On my role as a minister, I provide pastoral care to all age groups in my community, included pregnant mothers. They have to be cared and protected together with the babies in their wombs. This is not the case in many situations in our nation. Many babies are violated while they are still in the wombs of their mothers. *Right to Life New Zealand* reported that while 61 born children have died as a result of non-accidental injuries in New Zealand in the last 10 years, between 2005 and 2014 there were 153, 819 children have been killed in the womb as a result of deliberate injuries inflicted by medical professionals. This report points out that over 2, 500 unborn children killed by violent actions. I believe all of us have duty to protect the innocent life and it is appalling to see the violation and exploitation of babies in their *fonua* (wombs) of their mothers. What shall we do as a community to protect these innocent lives?

Children are victims of economic marginalization. They are marginalized because they are powerless and perceive as ignorant. In many poor communities like our Pacific communities our children are victims of economic marginalization because of the inequality that our families face in this nation. In a Book entitled, *Inequality – A New Zealand Crisis* edited by Max Rashbrooke, he states, “When people have hugely different incomes, they have different opportunities – and these differences can persist through generations.” (*Inequality*, p.9) This statement is real to many Pacific families. According to many surveys and reports, many of our Pacific families live under the poverty line. They live under the poverty line because of the inequality of incomes that they have. These differences definitely have a huge impact on child poverty. Child poverty is a serious and pro-long social problem that we face in this country. Children are economically deprived in homes and families.

According to the report from Dr Russell Wills, the Children’s Commissioner that 25% or 270, 000 children are living in poverty in New Zealand. From the same report it is about 3% or around 6 billion dollars that spend to resolve the problem of child poverty in this nation. These figures might not exactly right but they show somehow the worse effect of child poverty among our families. Children are going to school without lunches and without decent clothes to keep them warm during the Winter Season. Children have deceases that are causing by poor house condition. Sickness like asthma, eczema, gold, and flue are common health issues among children who live under the poverty line. If this is the trend in which our children face, then we expect unhealthy children in our society. Poverty is evidently a huge obstacle to our children whole human development. Can we able to resolve this problem? How can we address the issue of child poverty?

I believe there is no one single answer for the issue of poverty because it has multiple causes. However, one clear solution might be to close the gap between the have and the have not, the poor and the rich. If poverty causes by inequality as Max Rasbrooke claimed, then we have to break that barrier. Richard Wilkin and Kate Pickett in their book entitled, *The Spirit Level*, states, “The evidence shows that reducing inequality is the best way of improving the equality of the social environment, and so the real quality of life, for all of us.” (Wilkin & Pickett, p.29) Nelson Mandela also remarks, “Poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings.” (*Child Poverty Action Group* web-site) Apparently, Wilkin and Pickett, and Mandela’s claim can be true if those who hold the power, namely the government have the will to break that barrier. After the

government announced their budget for the new Financial Year, I asked the Director of the Methodist Mission Southern, Miss Laura Black, whether this budget deals with the problem of child poverty. Her answer was a clear “No”. The big winners of this budget are the middle class families. It means that the problem of child poverty will continue to exist in our society because thousands of families are still live under the poverty line.

### **Children as *Fonua* are Connected**

Because children are living beings and part of families and communities, they are obviously living in connection. They are connected like reef with their natural surroundings and obviously their survival depends on that connection. When that connection is jeopardised or damaged, children’s lives are at risk. For instance, children who are growing up in broken families are likely to be at risk in society. Bruce Logan in his book entitled, *Waking Up to Marriage*, states, that “One in five children under age of 12 months live in fatherless households.” (Logan, p. 37) These children are no longer having connection with their parents who are expected to be their first teachers in their first institution, which is home. (Logan, p. 39) Losing connection with parents will also lose the instruction and advice that children need for their social interaction with others. Furthermore, they start to listen to wrong people and wrong advices, which usually lead them into trouble. Logan continues to remark, “Of juveniles and young adults serving in long-term correction facilities, 70 percent did not live with both parents while growing up.” (Logan, p.37)

Most children who are disconnected with their parents and families are likely to end up in wrong places with wrong people. These children are likely to be victims of exploitation and oppression by people who are known as opportunists. These children are easily lured by these criminals without their consent because they lose the connection with parents and families. In some contexts, these children are forced into sex industry and in other contexts they are forced into slave labour in harsh conditions. *Save Children New Zealand* reported that children who are disconnected from their families and communities are easy target by these criminal organizations. Their disconnection from their natural surroundings like families and communities hinder them from their security, shelter, and sustenance.

*Fonua* cannot survive without connection with their natural surroundings so with children. Children are vital part of the strands in which families and society are weaving together. If the strand of children is disconnected the whole of the family and the social structures will collapse. Like a mat that has it strength from weaving together the whole strands so with families and society. Children must have a space in the whole pattern in order for families and society to stand strong. How can we ensure that this connection is maintain? Who is responsible for this connection to uphold? I am sure we definitely have answers but let me reflect on Jesus’ attitude toward children as a paradigm for building connection with children.

### **Jesus’ Attitude toward Children in Luke 18:16-17**

Before I will make a comment about Jesus’ attitude toward children in the gospel of Luke, I would like to put this passage into context. The story of Jesus’ welcoming of children according to Luke’s account came after two short stories. The first story is about a widow

who was seeking for justice as an example for persistent in prayer (Luke 18:1-8). Her searching for justice was finally granted. This story concludes with the words of Jesus. He says, “And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.” The second story is about a Pharisee and a tax-collector who went to the temple for prayer (Luke 18:9-14). In their prayers, they both beseeching God for justice. Of course they had their own ways of expressing their longing for justice. This story concludes with the words of Jesus. He says, “I tell you, this man (tax-collector) went down to his home justified rather than the other (Pharisee).” These two early stories in chapter 18 promulgate the significance of justice as a vital part in Jesus’ ministry. These stories seem to prepare the framework for the third story in chapter 18, which is the story about parents who brought their children to Jesus to be blessed and healed. These children were rejected but Jesus intervened and welcomed them.

This story in Luke has parallel references in Matthew 19:13-15 and Mark 10:13-16. Although the synoptic gospels told this story in a similar way but Luke formulates his story closely from the gospel of Mark. The way both Mark and Luke structure this story are similar. This story starts with parents brought their children to Jesus to be blessed. His disciples rejected and chased them away. When Jesus saw the attitude of his disciples he was disappointed and intervened to welcome these children. He said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

There are three important aspects in Jesus’ action that show his positive attitude toward children. The first aspect is his open arms acceptance of children (Come to me and do not stop them). The second aspect is his rebuking his disciples for rejection these little children (Do not stop them). The third aspect is his comparing the kingdom of God to children (It is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs). The word ‘kingdom’ derives from a Greek word, ‘*basileia*’, which means ‘kingdom, reign, and rule’. When the synoptic gospels talk about the ‘kingdom of God’, they obviously refer to the ‘reign and rule of God.’ The kingdom of God is not a domain or estate but about the rule and reign of God, taking place in someone’s life. When Jesus uses the word ‘kingdom’ in this context, he actually compares the rule and the reign of God to children. It is something that we could receive without any human effort for it is God’s gift. If God’s kingdom is a gift, then children are obviously free to have a share as other members of the community. Justo Gonzalez in his commentary in Luke’s gospel write something along that line.” He states, “The kingdom belongs to them, and to us, out of God’s sheer, unmerited favour.” (*Luke*, p.214)

The action of Jesus reflects his attitude toward children, which is contrary to the attitude of his disciples, which represents the common perception his society toward children. Gonzalez makes a comment on that kind of attitude during Jesus’ time. He remarks, “In the Greco-Roman world, it was perfectly legal to abandon a child did not wish to raise. Children were commonly seen as a source of family income in the future, and of security in old age – or as a way to pass on the family name and traditions.” (p.214) While the disciples represent the attitude of adults toward children, Jesus acted in a different manner. He welcomed, valued, and included children as unique members of his community and also the kingdom of God. Children may differ in terms of age and responsibilities but in the eyes of God they are the

same with everyone else. Jesus' action embodies the God of justice who seeks to defend the weak.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would like to say that the way children are treated and perceived today is no different from two thousand years ago. Children suffer because they are weak, powerless, and defenceless. They are victims of abuse, exploitation, cruelty in their families, in communities, and society. Children are longing and crying for justice and if our society still having deaf years there will be more children who will suffer in our homes and at our doorsteps. *Kuo fonua e hakau* concept insists to claim that children are so important today as of reef for they are resources that contribute for the wellbeing of our society both now and the future. He'ikai ke tau tali ke toki fonua e hakau ka kuopau ke tau tali 'a e hakau kuo fonua.

Malo 'aupito.