

HEREM VOIS BLONG MI STOP VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Message for the occasion of the “16 Days Of Activism “against Violence against Women and Girls – Delivered at the All Saints Church on Nov. 25th, 2018. Fr Nigel. F. Kelaepa

Introduction

Today is a great day, not only because the weather is nice but because we are here to mark the opening of this year's 16 days of activism. The fact that we are all here present today shows our support for the call to justice, fairness and equality for all of God's people in society and in our country and beyond, particularly for those who are oppressed and discriminated upon because of their gender, belief, race, colour, background or status in life.

Now what does activism mean and what does it entail? The 'friendly' people's encyclopedia, "Wikipedia", describes activism as: concerted efforts to promote, impede, direct or intervene in social, political, economic or environmental reform with the desire to make changes (usually for the better) in society. *Forms of activism range from writing letters to newspapers/news articles to Radio and TV media and social media, petitioning elected officials, running or contributing to a political campaign, preferential patronage of business and groups (or boycotting), and demonstrative forms of activism like rallies, street marches, strikes, sit ins, hunger strikes.*

The most highly visible and impactful activism often comes in the form of collective action, in which numerous individuals coordinate an act of protest or awareness together to make a bigger impact. Collective action that is purposeful, organised and sustained over a period of time becomes known as a social movement.

I hope that this 16 days of activism that we are embarking on starting from today will have something of what we have heard being described to us: that it will promote awareness against the evils of violence against women, girls, children and the innocent in society, and that it will help to mobilise concerted action towards greater impact in the fight to reduce and eliminate violence against women, girls, children and the vulnerable and innocent in society.

Body

Our theme for this 16 days of activism on "Violence Against Women and Girls", drawn from the United Nations theme on the same, is: "Hear My Voice or Cry", or "Herem Voice blo Mi" (in Pidgin)

A South American Liberation Theologian by the name of Gustavo Gutierrez stated in his book "Liberation Theology", that our God is a "God who stands with those on the Underside of History". Now who are those on the underside of history? He was referring to the masses of the poor, the oppressed, those who were pushed to the margins of society and discriminated against, often killed, because of their status, race, colour, creed and their vulnerability. Gutierrez contends that any theological reflection on the subjects of liberation and justice in all its forms must begin with the Biblical Exodus Story as its departure point. In Exodus 3:7-8, God said to Moses: "I have seen how cruelly my people are being treated in Egypt. I have heard them cry out to be rescued...I know all about their sufferings, and so I have come down to rescue them from the oppressors and bring them out from Egypt...and into the Promised Land".

God heard the cry of his oppressed people. It would be a cry quite like the one we've heard in our first reading today, and I quote:

Listen to my words, O LORD, and hear my sighs. Listen to my cry for help, my God and king! I pray to you, O LORD; you hear my voice in the morning; at sunrise I offer my prayer and wait for your answer. You are not a God who is pleased with wrongdoing; you allow no evil in your presence. You cannot stand the sight of the proud; you hate all who are wicked and despise violent, deceitful people. (Psalms 5:1-5 GNB)

This is a cry that is echoed almost daily by the vulnerable and oppressed, especially our women, girls and children, in this country and around the world.

As Christians, and therefore followers of Jesus Christ our Lord, who also stood on the side of the poor, the sick, and the hungry and needy, during his ministry on earth more than 2000 years ago, our God expects us to stand on the underside of history, to begin our reflections and concerted actions beside the vulnerable and oppressed in our communities and society, beside our innocent women, girls, children and men. He expects us to respond to the cry for help from our poor and vulnerable women, girls, children, and the innocent, in our communities and society, **and, to do something about it** – and not just sit back and do nothing, or reminisce about what might have been. We need to break the silence within and around us and speak out against the evils of VAWG in our communities and society.

Now there are some people in our societies and around the world, who are of the view that we are barking up the wrong tree and harping about nothing! Such people are influenced by a lifetime of 'indoctrination' in of a social and cultural attitude, construct and stereotyping that is systemic and imbedded in a society that is highly patriarchal and favours that male genus of our species (homosapiens).

Ever heard of the song: "It's a man's, man's, man's world" by Betty Jean Newsome and James Brown? The lyrics to the first two verses goes:

*This is a man's world, this a man's world,
But it wouldn't be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl.*

*You see, man made the cars to take us over the road,
Man made the train to carry the heavy load,
Man made electric light to take us out of the dark,
Man made the boat for the water, like Noah made the ark,
This is a man's, mans, man's world,*

But it wouldn't be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl.

Wow, who said it's exclusively a man's world? Obviously here is someone who believes as with all of us who are here, that that the world equally belongs to the man and the women who are both created in the image of God, and that the world would be nothing without the presence of the women or the other living together in harmony and peace.

How do I know this? I know so because I actually lived and am continuing to live it, as the composer of the song obviously experienced, but also because the figures and statistics carried out by credible studies in the recent times and that are in front of me, says so. Now I know it's an unpleasant thing to be confronted with the figures and stats but it is an essential unpleasantness that we must bear with and be reminded with at all times lest we forget, so here goes:

The Solomon Islands has one of the highest rates of domestic, gender-based and sexual violence in the world. We are ranked between 5th to 10th highest in the world, and fluctuate between second and third in the Pacific region; with 64% of women aged 15-49 reporting physical or sexual abuse by someone close to the family or a partner. 18% of women had experienced non-partner violence and 37% had been sexually abused before the age of 15. It is projected that least 1 in every 3 women and girls will experience physical and sexual violence during their lifetime.

I shudder every time I hear these statistics and think about what it is like to be born a girl or a woman, and more so to be a woman or a girl in this country, and in this society, at this point in time. Friends, this is crime against humanity and a crime against our God, who deemed it the pinnacle of his creative task, to make man and women in his own image and after his own likeness, on the sixth and final day of Creation.

For us, there is no two ways about it, no choice. As Christians and people who love and seek after justice, fairness, equality and the peace and harmonious reign of God's Kingdom in this world and in our lives, we must stand together to fight against and rid our society of all the evils of Domestic and Gender based violence and abuse in all its forms, be they physical, mental, emotional or sexual. God commands us to do justice. Scripture not only reveals God's heart for justice, Scripture clearly calls us to live justly. In Isaiah 1:17, God speaks to us through the prophet Isaiah, telling us to, "Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." In Proverbs 31:8-9, God urges us to, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."

Friends, brothers and sisters and fellow countrywomen and men, in these 16 days of activism, let us confront violence and injustice, systemic or otherwise, in our communities and society because we, as Christ followers, have been equipped and empowered to confront injustice in Christ's name. Jesus embodied God's justice through his teaching, his advocacy for those on the margins, his solidarity with their suffering, and his confrontation of injustice on the cross. Our faith provides us with spiritual weapons to confront principalities and powers through prayer and coordinated collaborative action. We confront injustice because we have hope in the purposes of God for those on the underside of history and because we have the power of Christ in us.

We need to be strong listeners in our communities and give value to those who are directly affected by injustices present in the system. This means acknowledging their dignity by making room for them to give voice to their pain and providing guidance and helping to bring stories from our communities into the public square. Through such actions, we can help to amplify the voice of the oppressed and add our own voices to their cries so that they can no longer be denied a voice (that has long been silenced), to speak out the truth and to bring out their story of suffering to the light of day. By doing this, we are empowering those who are experiencing injustice with their allies to stand against the forces of violence in their communities that steal, kill, and destroy.

Conclusion

Finally, it is my appeal to Christians and all fellow Solomon Islanders and friends from elsewhere, but especially to would be perpetrators, to take time to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd who calls us daily to follow him into his sheepfold (Kingdom). In our second reading from the Gospel of John, the Lord tells us that his sheep recognises his voice and follow him to greener pastures as he leads them out.

To recognise Christ's voice friends, is to heed his call to advocate for justice for the vulnerable and innocent and those on the margins. To recognise Christ's voice is to heed his urging to be in solidarity with our suffering women, girls and children and to advocate for their rights to non-violence, freedom from oppression and peaceful co-existence with all of humanity.

Such is what God expects out of us god-fearing and peace-loving men and women in this country and such is what we must advocate for in these 16 days of activism.

No self-respecting person of worth and no Christian who claims to hear and recognise the voice of the shepherd calling to him daily, can ever be a perpetrator and an accomplice to violence and injustice in all its forms, and especially against our women, girls and children and the innocent today. Only those who follow the father of all lies (who comes to steal, kill and destroy) carry on such evils in our society.

We pray that God will bless all the activities of these 16 days of activism and that these will help to bring out more awareness and understanding amongst our people concerning the evils of violence against women, girls and innocent and vulnerable children and families in society today.



An action to support the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence