

REFLECTION 10 SEPTEMBER 2023 "THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND; THIS LAND IS MY LAND"

By Rev Dr Fei Taule'ale'ausumai

(Play song on phone and speaker) This Land Is Your Land Words and Music by Woody Guthrie

Peter, Paul and Mary version on Spotify.

*This land is your land, this land is my land
From California to the New York island,
From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters;
This land was made for you and me.*

*I've roamed and rambled and I followed my footsteps
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts;
And all around me a voice was sounding;
This land was made for you and me.*

*As I was walking that ribbon of highway
I saw above me that endless skyway;
I saw below me that golden valley;
This land was made for you and me.*

*When the sun came shining, and I was strolling,
And the wheat fields waving and the dust clouds rolling,
As the fog was lifting a voice was chanting:
This land was made for you and me.*

Although the song is often recognized as a patriotic anthem, Native Americans argue that the song plays into America's continual erasure of Indigenous peoples in culture. Many pointed out that America rests on stolen land, while others called it "tone deaf" for such a ceremony. The verses that have been omitted in most of the sung versions of this song are the following that I have highlighted as follows:

*As I went walking I saw a sign there,
And on the sign it said, "No Trespassing."*

*But on the other side it didn't say nothing.
That side was made for you and me.*

*In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people,
By the relief office I seen my people;
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking
Is this land made for you and me?*

*Nobody living can ever stop me,
As I go walking that freedom highway;
Nobody living can ever make me turn back
This land was made for you and me.*

I don't think that song will go down very well here in Aotearoa, what do you think? Land is controversial no matter what country, family or tribe or village you come from. The indigenous concept of land is as God of many names and tribes also intended it to be "Land is gift, it is not to be owned but to be shared". When land was shared it became covenantal land and at the end of your tenure it will be returned to the tribe, village. The concept of "ahi ka" or in English "keeping the home fires burning". Meant that the land was never vacant that even in your absence you kept the fires burning showing that it continued to be cared for in your absence. Papatuanuku mother earth.

Tangata Whenua: People of the land. Whenua is also the Polynesian term for "placenta", when you are born your parents will bury your placenta in the land of your birth and that becomes your turangawaewae, your place to stand.

Many continue to practice this today and not just Polynesians. I believe Lynne and Ben you did this with your grandson Fergus' placenta in France?

Globally land is a precious commodity; the small island nations of Kiribati and Tuvalu live each day on their land strip not knowing whether it may be there tomorrow due to rising sea levels. One Tsunami and all land and lives will be lost.

For us here in Aotearoa NZ Te Tiriti o Waitangi is our covenant as people of the Tiriti to honour and respect the rights of Tangata Whenua, the people of the land of Aotearoa. We are called to live side by side knowing like the Leviticus verse tells us as people on a land owned by te Atua, God as we are merely strangers and sojourners. ²³ 'The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land *is* Mine; for you *are* strangers and sojourners with Me.

I was talking to the chair of our Vaka of Stories last Saturday and he explained to me that in Tonga, the king gifted land to the eldest sons of every family and on their death it would go to the next son in line but never to the daughters.

On one of my visits to Papua New Guinea I visited Hanuabada village.

Hanuabada is a coastal village in Papua New Guinea in the outskirts of the nation's capital, Port Moresby. It is on stilts in the sea, there is no land (similar to the picture on the front cover). It is the biggest village in the Motuan tribe and is often known by its locals as " HB ". Hanuabada means "big village" (hanua "village" + bada "big") in Motu. But close up, the squalor is overwhelming. Children swim in water next to floating soiled nappies. At the shoreline the rubbish has built up metres deep. The formerly pristine white sand beach is now black mud.

One of the villagers said "There is going to be a big hygiene problem here and that worries me for the future, that worries me for the children, and for my child as well."

Hanuabada, a traditional town on stilts, has sat on the coast near Papua New Guinea's capital Port Moresby for thousands of years.

In South America, I went on a bus trip in Sao Paulo Brazil and we drove through an area called “Cocolande”. The land of cocaine! Cocolande was known to be the cocaine drug district, this is where those addicted to drugs came to score. It was just the way that it is, a land filled with cocaine addicts, their reality.

In Samoa most of the land is traditional titled and family land. You are given some land to build your house but you can never own it outright as it cannot be sold or privatized. Many Samoans who are living overseas are buying private land to build their holiday homes on so you are free to do your own thing and do not have exist around village rules and protocol.

Land in the Old Testament: According to renown Old Testament Biblical Scholar Walter Brueggeman, the land was one of the most vibrant symbols for the people of ancient Israel. In the land gift, promise, and challenge was found to be the physical source of Israel's fertility and life, and a place for the gathering of the hopes of the covenant people.

THE SALE AND REDEMPTION OF LAND (25:23-28): Plots of land in Canaan were never to be sold permanently (in perpetuity) because the land belonged to God. Land could only be leased. If a poor man leased his land due to financial troubles, he had the right to redeem (buy back) the land if he desired

Land was seen as a blessing from God, when the people moved away from God they were often exiled and landless. One of the questions I used to ask myself as a youth was “How can God promise land to the Israelites when there were already people living on it?” That was someone else’s home! We look at the plight of indigenous people the world over, having their land stolen from them through so called discovery (even though it was already inhabited), colonialism and slavery etc.

In the Middle East, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the world's longest-running and most controversial conflicts over land. At its heart, it is a conflict between two self-determination movements — the Jewish Zionist project and the Palestinian nationalist project — that lay claim to the same territory. But it is so, so much more complicated than that.

Though both Jews and Arab Muslims date their claims to the land back a couple thousand years, the current political conflict began in the early 20th century. Jews fleeing persecution in Europe wanted to establish a national homeland in what was then an Arab- and Muslim-majority territory in the Ottoman and later British Empire. The Arabs resisted, seeing the land as rightfully theirs. An early United Nations plan to give each group part of the land failed, and Israel and the surrounding Arab nations fought several wars over the territory. Today's lines largely reflect the outcomes of two of these wars, one waged in 1948 and another in 1967.

The 1967 war left Israel in control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, two territories home to large Palestinian populations:

Today, the West Bank is nominally controlled by the Palestinian Authority and is under Israeli occupation. This comes in the form of Israeli troops, who enforce Israeli security restrictions on Palestinian movement and activities, and Israeli “settlers,” Jews who build ever-expanding communities in the West Bank that effectively deny the land to Palestinians. Gaza is controlled by Hamas, an Islamist fundamentalist party.

Our Hebrew reading from Leviticus 25:23 basically claims that: ²³ ‘The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land *is* Mine; for you *are* strangers and

sojourners with Me. Many right-wing Christian groups in Samoa and here in Aotearoa are Zionists and they travel to Israel and continue to pray for the rightful return of the land to the chosen people of Israel.

I really struggled to find the theme of land in the New Testament, there was stories of landowners but not about land possession and land as gift or covenant as in the Old Testament. So, I chose the story of the prodigal son in our Lukan reading who demanded his share of his inheritance from his father whilst he was still alive in the process insulting his father in other words saying "I wish you were dead". Word would have quickly spread around the community about what he did and so it would have been very difficult for the son to sell his share of the property/land. It says after a while, he eventually left. He most likely did not get top dollar for it and sold it at a loss. People would not have wanted him to profit out of his father's pain.

"The land is Mine, and you reside in My land as foreigners and strangers." Perhaps this sentence is a paradigm for understanding our obligation and responsibility to creation and in particular land as gift and covenant. I wonder if this could be a potential foundation from which we should consider every social issue we face in our world. Amen.

