

Vahanoa: A Space of Opportunities

Vahanoa is made out of two words, ‘*vaha*’, meaning ‘space’, and ‘*noa*’, meaning ‘empty or zero’. The notion of ‘*noa*’ in this context is not about void but is about unknown. When these two words of ‘*vaha*’ and ‘*noa*’ are joining together, they become ‘*vahanoa*’, meaning ‘unknown or uncertain space’. When we speak of ‘*vahanoa*’ we refer to the deep ocean, a space of unknown and uncertainty, but at the same time a space that can provide new opportunities. When in Dunedin, I usually go to St Clair beach for a walk on my day off. I walked down one day, and it was a fine day but was very windy, which caused a rough sea. The big waves rolled down and crashed on the seawall of the Esbalande causing excitement for the passers-by. I looked to the deep ocean with fear and wonder. I felt fear because of the big waves and strong wind that can damage boats and cost lives. I was immediately reminded about the Lampedusa Cross (a cross in Dunedin Methodist Parish that was made from wrecked boats) and what it represents, remembering the danger of crossing the deep ocean. There are unknown obstacles that voyagers are unexpectedly face as they navigate their way in the deep ocean. It prompts everyone to prepare for those moments. But I was also looking with awe to the vast space that the deep ocean provides for voyagers and explorers who are searching for new opportunities on the far end of the world. That reminds me of the courage that my ancestors had as they travelled across rough seas, powerful currents and strong winds searching for lands of opportunities as the historians told us.

Vahanoa can also refer to unknown land space and unknown territories where people migrate to and settle. Because they have moved from the familiar and the known to the unfamiliar and the unknown, they are regarded as people who are settled on the *vahanoa*, an unfamiliar space. Obviously, every migrant who settles in a new land will face the reality of the unknown and unfamiliar challenges. These challenges can pose a threat to any migrant’s integrity and cultural identity. Yet, settling in a new land can offer new opportunities to pursue and utilise for the betterment of life. I believe that to be the experience of most of the refugees who settle in many of our cities recently. The new destination where they have now settled offers them hope and a better future for their children.

Although *vahanoa* can pose a threat to those who travel across it we cannot deny the opportunities it provides for those who have courage and vision of a better future. It is that kind of hope which gives travellers the mindset to stay positive during hardship. We are all travellers in one way or the other and we are always in the middle of *vahanoa* experience. Sometimes, when we are in that sphere of life, we give up hope and optimism rather than tracking on with courage and expectation of opportunities. John O’Donohue in his book, entitled, *To Bless the Space Between Us*, writes, “Consequently, when we stand before crucial thresholds in our lives, we have no rituals to protect, encourage, and guide us as we cross over into the unknown. For such crossings we need to find new words.” But I suppose finding new words is not good enough without finding new actions and new meanings.

I am always impressed with the calling story of the first disciples as the author of Luke’s gospel wrote in Luke 5:1-11. Jesus said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” The result of letting down their nets in the middle of uncertainty and unknown that they caught so many fish, their nets were

almost destroyed. This story portrays the picture of those who are in the *vahanoa* experience. They are frustrated and stressed for there is no positive outcome of their hard work for the whole night. It is understandable that they were inclined to give up hope altogether. Yet, the words of Jesus stirred them to maintain their hope and helped them to realise that there were still opportunities yet to discover in the midst of their chaos. Furthermore, it was his failure that gave Simon another opportunity to embrace a new action and to find new a meaning for his life and career.

Relatively, it feels to me that our church, in some ways, going through a *vahanoa* experience in one way or the other. Like Simon Peter, we are all frustrated and stressed because we have worked so hard with little result. To add to our frustration, our membership is declining and congregations aging. We are obviously in the middle of the crossroad. Can we still have hope in the midst of our uncertainty? Can we still find opportunities for growth in the unknown? Our Methodist tradition reminds us that we must look beyond the four walls of our church buildings for opportunities for action and mission. This tradition reconnects us with the well-known saying of John Wesley, “The world is my parish.” *Vahanoa* reminds us the challenges that we face in our journey in the unknown space, but it also reminds us the hope we still yet have to discover in our exploration. Let’s ask God, and each other, where best to ‘cast our nets’ in the midst of all our uncertainties.

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