Job 19.23-27; Psalm 121; 1 John 4.7-18a; John 21.15-19 Requiem for Br. John Blyth
Fr. Clarence Li March 15, 2023

From the opening vesicle of the Melanesian Brotherhood Daily Office:
The Lord called to him those he wanted. And we came to him.

There are a few reasons why I have always felt close to Br. John throughout my entire ordained ministry. And surprise! It all began here at St. James'. It would be hard for me to remember John without thinking about his lifelong friendship with Fr. David Retter who welcomed me to St. James' and supervised my curacy. The friendship they first developed way back when they were attending Trinity College in Toronto continued through their ministries among the Nisga'a in the Nass Valley and had stood the test of time and geography when they later followed their respective calls to serve in different parts of the world. And when David died very suddenly in 2005, I drew the lot to deliver the sad news to John who was in Honiara. Within a week he stood on this very same pulpit as the preacher at his best friend's Requiem Mass. And since that date, John took up the mantle left behind by David and became my surrogate mentor. And when my partner Dave and I decided to tie the knot in 2010, there was no better choice for a preacher than Br. John. This is a long way to say how humbled I am standing here today.

Three weeks ago, I also had the privilege to be the *cell phone holder* during the last weeks of John's life at Mount Saint Joseph Hospital and Cottage Hospice to bear witness to the love of Christ shared by Tasiu John and his brothers in Tabalia and London, England. I have learned that *Tasiu* means brother in the indigenous language of the Solomon Islanders and is both a respectful and endearing term for members of the Melanesian Brotherhood within the society in Melanesia and other regions the brothers serve. As many of you may know, John had been struggling with memory loss quite badly in the last few years. One of the greatest sufferings coming out of that was being isolated from his wider network of friends because he no longer was able to answer his cell phone, which had been his gateway to connect with all his relations in different parts of the world since his return from the Solomon Islands. And if you know John, you realize that this network is huge and stretches across oceans and continents. One memorable moment these last weeks was assisting John to connect with Fr. Richard Carter through video chat. Fr. Richard was a former chaplain of the Melanesian Brotherhood who now served in London, England. For a brief window of a few minutes, John snapped out of his restlessness and agony and returned to his old gentle self speaking the Solomon Islands pidgin to his old friend. They read the Morning Office from the Brotherhood Prayer Book together, offered prayers for each other, and John blessed Richard while trying to touch him on the screen before signing off. His friends from Tabalia including Archbishop Leonard Dawea, also got to visit with him briefly with prayers and songs. The level of tenderness and mutual devotion to each other's lives were so evident. For a moment I felt that I was witnessing a mutual feeding of each other's souls of the finest kind and tears rushed to my eyes.

Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Feed my sheep."

Feed My Sheep happens to be the title of a course in pastoral counselling Tasiu John developed for The Melanesian Brotherhood back in 2001. When John was prepping for one of his many trips to the Solomons Island one time, I asked for a copy of the course out of curiosity while he

was mass producing them on the photocopier. Allow me to indulge you a little into John's charism as a tutor:

> LESSON ONE: JESUS THE GOOD SHEPHERD
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> WHAT IS A SHEEP? Sheep and goats were important to people in early Bible times, To have a large number of sheep and goats was a sign of being rich. A sheep to the Jews was as valuable as a pig is to many people in Melanesia…
>
> WHAT IS A SHEPHERD? We see then that a shepherd believes that each sheep is important to him. He must be strong and courageous. He must be patient. He must put the needs of the sheep before his own needs even when this means not getting any sleep or facing danger and even death.

[*End of excerpt*]

That brought tears to my eyes too. These are not mere words in a coursebook. Back in 2003, seven brothers of the Melanesian Brotherhood were kidnapped and murdered while on a peacemaking mission to persuade the rebel leader to disarm. Tasiu John and his brothers know what "facing danger and even death" is all about. The brothers knew what losing some of their dearest and the associated traumas were like. Still, when Keke, the rebel leader eventually surrendered, the community found a way to forgive him and others perpetrators. Fr. Richard Carter in his book "In Search of the Lost" wrote:

> *If you ask us how this Community can forgive Keke or Cawa I do not know, and yet when I see Christ in my Brothers I realize they are holding no hatred or bitterness, but are free in a way Keke and Cawa are not. Thus strangely even hatred can be transformed into compassion and mercy for those who are still prisoners.*

Jesus said to him a second time, "Tend my sheep"

John preached no-frills and deeply relatable sermons. You get a glimpse of that in the excerpt I read earlier. It is pointless to talk about sheep in the Solomon Islands because hardly anyone has ever seen one. But when you mention a pig, people's imagination goes wild. I recalled hearing many stories about pigs in Tabalia and John's struggle to see them being eaten. Looking back at his earlier life, it took John quite some years and a few seasons of intense discernment to discover his true calling in teaching and accompaniment. Once he realized that, he devoted every minute of the rest of his life to serving as a teacher and accompanier in Christ. When John left the Cathedral Church of the Redeemer in Calgary, he took a leave from ministry and work in the kitchen at Victory House, a home for people with chronic mental health challenges next door to this church. I remembered him telling me that he enjoyed working at Victory House very much. Like this story from the last chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus has a way to reach us in our confusion and restore our place within the community of the beloved. I wonder if that was John's experience at Victory House when his brokenness and the brokenness of others became an incubator for them to listen deeply to the voice of Christ the Beloved. John left Victory House to become the Anglican Chaplain at Vancouver School of Theology, a role that allow him to tend his call to be a teacher and accompanier. While he was at VST, he got literally snatched

up to become the principal of Bishop Patterson Theological College in Honiara, which happens to be the next-door neighbour of the headquarter of the Melanesia Brotherhood. And the rest is history.

In our Gospel story, Jesus came to his guilt-ridden and grief-stricken friends and met them exactly where they were. And he speaks peace to them to set them free. To Simon Peter, Jesus offered him a different narrative of their relationship – from "I do not know this man" to "You know that I love you." Even in my cowardice and my various attempts to disown you out of fear, you know that I love you. And that very act to acknowledge his limited and imperfect love for Christ was deemed enough for Jesus and was reckoned as faith. And in that very moment, Peter's guilt of cowardice and betraying his friend and most beloved teacher was instantly exorcised.

And Jesus said to him a third time, "Feed my sheep." And P.S.: You better be ready to follow me and carry my cross. And Peter did. And so did Tasiu John as he stretched out his hands, and let someone else fasten a belt around him and take him where he did not wish to go during the last few weeks of his life.

Fr. Richard in his book uses the term "brave humility" to describe the quality that is a unique expression of the Melanesian Brotherhood. John's life reflects this brave humility beautifully and with added tenderness.

In his announcement of Tasiu John's death to the members of the Brotherhood, Richard wrote:

> *He was a true brother, a man of deep humility- he lived with such simplicity to the very end. Until there was nothing left to separate him from the Lord he loved and he served. He had only his black shirt and trousers his brotherhood medal, his sash- no pride or possessions- just ready to let go of all to be held by God forever.*

Our dying, free of any notions of whatever we believe to be a good death, can become the painful birth of a deeper humanity rooted in the passion of Christ Jesus for the sake of a groaning Creation yet to be reborn.

And John would no longer be taken to where he did not want to go, for Fr. Richard Nokia and Br. Nelson will bring his ashes home.

The Lord called to him those he wanted. And John came to him.