

Interview with Rev. Victor Joseph by Brooke Prentis

Cairns, QLD

Abstract

Rev. Victor Joseph is the Principal of Woltulp-Bi-Buya College and a Torres Strait Islander priest within the North Queensland Anglican Diocese. Wontulp-Bi-Buya is a college for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders that offers courses in the areas of theology, addictions management, community development, and mental health. The ecumenical college also offers a cross-cultural awareness course for non-Indigenous students.

Interview

Victor: I'm a Torres Strait Islander, born on Thursday Island, and I spent most of my life up in the Torres Strait. I lived on St Paul's community, Moa Island in the Torres Strait, but I have grandparental connections to Murray Island through my grandmother on my Mum's side, and also to Mabuiag Island as well.

But since moving to Cairns, I also have a connection to the Wuthathi tribe on Shelburne Bay in Cape York.

Brooke: Is there anything you wanted to say about their location?

Victor: [Well] Murray Island is in the eastern part of the Torres Strait, and Mabuiag is in the near western cluster.

Brooke: Great. And when did you become a Christian? Can you tell us a bit about your testimony?

Victor: Okay ... I think I became a Christian about 1997. It was around that time that my youngest daughter was born. She was born on Thursday Island, but she had complications when she was

born, so she had to be medically evacuated here to Cairns. It was about that time that the helicopter was leaving the hospital... I had some solitary time on the beach and I was seeing the helicopter go off, and I sort of made a commitment to God at that time that if he was to heal my daughter I was going to give him my whole life and do my best to serve him, as much as possible.

Brooke: Wonderful. And what has been the role of the Holy Spirit in your Christian life, I guess today ... and even also in the past?

Victor: I think the Holy Spirit plays a very, very important role. I think [as] the helper... as scripture tells us the Lord Christ said to his disciples - and keeps saying to us today. You know, we sometimes refer to [the Holy Spirit] within Indigenous circles as the Creator Spirit. Within the Torres Strait we refer to it as Magi Mari, which means "Holy Spirit," and it becomes central to all we do and say, and how we live.

Especially as Indigenous people... you think about creation stories, that the Spirit was with us, that God walked with our people through the Creator Spirit, or Holy Spirit Magi Mari (Western language) or Lamar Zogo (Eastern language). Only Christ was more revealed to us when the missionaries came. That's probably the best way I can sum up in regards to the Holy Spirit in my Christian life.

Brooke: Okay.

Victor: That's usually said in prayers or in hymns and choruses within the Torres Strait Islander church.

One of the songs that includes the Holy Spirit was written by the late Miseron Levi of St Paul Community, Moa Island, Torres Strait. It is available in various versions on YouTube and Soundcloud.

Baba waiyar ninu maigi mari

Baba waiyar ninu maigi angelal

Ngalmunia kaimel inub kubil nu

Inub kubil nu kurusika goiga

(Repeat)

Father we ask you please send us your Holy Spirit

Father we ask you for your Holy angels too

Please come and stay with us all through this night

All through this night until the morning light

(Repeat)

Inub kubil nu

Inub kubil nu Kurusika goiga

Baba waiyar ninu maigi mari

Brooke: What does the Dreaming mean to you?

Victor: This was a tough question for me to think about and answer, especially from within the Torres Strait. I mean, when the word Dreaming comes up, I think the perception, the normal perception, is that it talks about the Aboriginal spirituality, more than the Torres Strait.

I think for us within the Torres Strait it's all about the creation stories. Even as we spoke about - there's a similarity there in terms of the Dreaming, it talks about creation. But I think for me, there's a strong connection in terms of places of significance and also the traditional spiritual connections to who we are (whether an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person) and of where we come from.

That we were born first and foremost as an Indigenous person, before we ever became a Christian, and so therefore it's important for us to always maintain that connection with our Indigenous spirituality wherever we are.

Brooke: Related to this track - how do you think about the relationship between your culture and cultures, and Christianity, and even spirituality?

Victor: Okay. Well, I was born first and foremost as a Torres Strait Islander person. I didn't become a Christian straight away. And, not until I was [in my] early twenties. So, I lived my life as an Indigenous person, especially as a Torres Strait Islander person. I grew up within the culture and the tradition, understanding the basic languages that were spoken, so therefore my relationship with my culture is, is important for me. Then I became a Christian, because as I said, I wanted to commit my life to God.

So that relationship between my culture and my Christianity is, is strong. Because when we think about the Christ himself, who had a culture... had his culture... but at the same time had his commitment to what he was sent to do by his father. So, that relationship for me as a Torres Strait Islander person, and then becoming more in tune with my Aboriginal heritage, it's still strong, in terms of who I am. I'll die as a Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander person - but I'll die as a man that has given his whole life over to God through my Christianity.

Brooke: And so, as we just explore culture a bit more, are there some significant traditions, cultural celebrations that you consider important?

Victor: On the islands within the Torres Strait, we have church days [celebrating] the particular saint of the local church. So, on those particular days, it's a significant event within the communities that we come from. It's a church and community celebration, and there's feasting and traditional dancing. And it's acknowledgment of our forebears or our Elders who established the church within the community when the missionaries came - it was there for a purpose and that, and we reap the fruits today of the acceptance, and the decisions and the commitment and faith of our forebears. So, there's strong cultural celebrations surrounding that.

But the most common one up in the Torres Strait is July the 1st, when the missionaries came in 1871, so, and that's celebrated very strongly by the whole Torres Strait, regardless of church or denomination, because of what has happened on that day, on Erub, on 1871.

Brooke: And that, cultural celebration for the purpose of the recording is called? "The coming..."

Victor: "The Coming of the Light." Yes, yeah. Sorry, I have to acknowledge as well that even though coming of the light came to Erub, each particular island had their own unique coming of the light as well. If I could just share that. Because the missionaries landed... on 1871 on July the 1st, we acknowledge that as a region within the Torres Strait, but each particular island had their own as well, of when the missionaries first visited those villages back then, and brought the missionaries to each particular island. So I wanted to say that, because, July 1 is like a national celebration within the Torres Strait... not only within the Torres Strait [but] wherever Torres

Strait Islander people are, around Australia, all over the world, we have a strong significance of connection to July the 1st.

Brooke: And so you talked about church days, did that mean each of those islands celebrating their own day of missionaries coming, or are those other church day celebrations that are recognised on particular islands?

Victor: Each island has their own special, I suppose, Coming of the Light. Those church days that I mentioned were actually when the church was consecrated on that particular day, so, [it] becomes the church day for that particular community. But also, you know, they have their own special day as well, when the missionaries arrived there as well, at a different time.

Brooke: And in the Torres Strait Islands, or the ones that you've had connection with, through your own journey and identity, is there a direct connection between the creation stories and the Christian faith and practice? I guess my question is, are they integrated, or still separate?

Victor: The creation stories and Christianity? I think it's... a hard question for me to answer, because the only very common creation stories up there which I know [are on] Murray Island... and again I can't speak on behalf of any other island because my knowledge is very limited and I probably don't have the permission anyway to speak about [it].

So ... you probably would have heard the story of Malo¹ before, so ... Malo was like that forerunner for the missionaries, of the traditional laws that were established on Murray Island. So, back to your question - I think there is some separation but also there is some connection there. There's a connection, you know... depending on the creation story. And as I said, Malo is the only one that I can actually [speak to] in regards to that connection.

Brooke: Are there any cultural celebrations, or observances, that you wouldn't expect Christians to be able to participate in?

Victor: I suppose. Depending on the event, you know. The culture within the Torres Strait has evolved a bit over time. You know, we as Torres Strait Islander Christians, we will participate in any cultural occasion, any cultural event - we have to acknowledge that. There could be some

¹ Please see pages 112 -113 for the story of Malo.

occasions where I suppose Christians may not participate, that depends on the event, but I don't know of any celebration or observances ... but the majority always have a presence of Indigenous Christians in all cultural events. Because at the end of the day, you know, our nation is before, that, you know. I knew my cultural traditions first, before I knew Christ. So, I can't do that away.

Brooke: Which churches or denominations have been significant in your journey as a Christian?

Victor: Okay. I grew up Church of England from my grandparents, on my mother's side. It had a strong, very strong presence in the early years. And then we had the Pentecostal movement in the 50s and 60s. So there [has been] a very strong ecumenical presence since then.

In saying that, you know, I grew up within the Church of England that became the Anglican Church. But I gave my heart to God, and accepted Jesus as my Lord and Saviour in a Pentecostal church. So both denominations have had a significant impact on my life to this very day. Especially within my role here as the principal of this college, of Woltulp-Bi-Buya, we have a very strong ecumenical presence here. So therefore ... I am open to all Christian faith that acknowledges the Holy Trinity and Jesus Christ as Lord, yeah.

Brooke: How have you found that the churches or denominations that you've attended, related to local Torres Strait Islander or Aboriginal culture...

Victor: Yeah. I'm a locum of Cairns Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ministry within the Anglican Church here in Cairns. So our church is unique in [a] sense, because our congregation is very much Indigenous. [It] was established years ago when there was a need for an Indigenous church within the Anglican Church here in Cairns. So, an Indigenous church... no doubt there's gonna be a very strong presence of culture and tradition within it.

And so we acknowledge that in everything that we do in the church - in terms of traditional instruments, singing in language, worshipping in language, and at times praying in language. All that resonates strongly within the church that I'm associated with. And I think it's good for the church as a whole, the national church as a whole. Because I'm sure the national church could learn a few things from the way we as Indigenous people come together, and worship.

Brooke: What knowledges do you think are important to pass onto younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christians?

Victor: I think it's important for us to not disconnect from culture and tradition first. The way society is today, that, and, especially where, especially where he or she may be living, is to keep the connections strong with your culture and tradition, first and foremost. Our elders, our Christian elders need the younger people to rise up, because for the sake of maintaining a strong Indigenous presence within the church as a whole. And, and I think that, for we, we need to continue to encourage and support our younger generation to have a platform to voice. They'll make mistakes, they'll learn, and then they'll pick themselves up, we support them and we'll continue to move forward, and I, I think that's going to be very, very important for us. But I think that at the end of the day, our younger generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to maintain a strong link back to their cultural tradition from where they come from.

Brooke: What is your hope for the church in Australia?

Victor: My hope is that the church as a whole will have strong Indigenous men and women in leadership, and to be in a position where they can be a voice to make change and to contribute as a whole, not only to the church, but to the whole as a nation. That's my hope. And, we gotta start somewhere, and hopefully this research that you're doing will help encourage that.

Brooke: Do you have any final thoughts that you wanted to share at all?

Victor: I think it's been a long time coming to have a research done on this particular subject. I think this will challenge the national church as a whole in terms of where they are right now, what are they doing [for] Indigenous people? Can they do more? ...or are they not doing anything? What do they need to do?

Sure, they can have a reconciliation action plan, that's all good, but in that it takes more than just words, it needs a lot of action and support along the way. I don't doubt for a moment that we have strong spirit-filled vocal Aboriginal men and women out there that need a platform.

We all need each other within the church. It's just not one race of people, it's a multicultural race of people. Because at the end of the day, as I think back to John in the Book of Revelation, he said in that vision he was standing before the throne of God [with] the whole race of people... all clothed in white, with palm leaves in their arms, singing hosanna, giving their praise to God.

So that's a multitude of people from different backgrounds, and for me I think, that's to come, but we've gotta' have that right now, within our national church.

The Story of Malo

Excerpt from "Indigenous Spirituality and the Church: A Cultural Faith"

Presentation by the late Bishop Saibo Mabo, Assistant Bishop to the NQ Anglican Diocese.

Darlington Centre, University of Sydney, 8th July, 2003

On my traditional homeland of Mer Island (Murray Island) in the Torres Strait, this mysterious power and presence was experienced through the ancestor "god" of Malo. Creative powers were expressed through this "god". Malo is a symbol of the mysterious power and presence of Creator God revealed in the Bible. He was also present in pre-Christian, Indigenous cultures. Our Mer Island spirituality is linked with the coming of Malo...

Malo and three of his brothers came from the direction of PNG, from a place called Tyogere. The three brothers were named Segar, Kulka and Sieu. They rowed their canoes from Toogere to the Torres Strait Islands, but they decided to go separate and go to different islands. Malo decided to go to Mer Island.

A woman fishing on the shore witnessed and experienced the coming of Malo. We can say that Malo used this woman to make himself known to the people. This woman's name was Kabour. Kabour looked towards the horizon and she saw a lugger boat sailing towards her. But, when she looked again, instead of the lugger, she saw a meido, a variety of palm growing on the riverbanks of PNG. It was floating towards her, then somehow it changed into a gugur pod, a variety of bamboo and continued to float towards her. But then something happened! She looked down and saw an octopus, stretching its eight tentacles towards her. Kabour grabbed a spear and speared the octopus. ... She put the octopus in her basket and took it home with her. Later that night, Kabour told her husband, Dog, the mysterious things that she saw and experienced before she speared the octopus.

Later that night, while they were looking at the basket, they saw a light appearing from the octopus' eyes. Then they saw a man jump out of the basket and with the light from his eyes showing the way, the man walked out from the house. He walked all over Mer Island. When the man returned at about 3 or 4 in the morning, Kabour and Dog were still awake and they watched as he jumped back in the basket and the light in the man's eyes went out.

A few days later, Kabour's cousins- two brothers – came to visit them because they had heard that something special and mysterious was in the house. The two cousins stayed up late and saw the same thing that had happened previously. They decided to steal the basket and take it to where other tribes

lived. The light and movement of the man, Malo, made them aware that he was a special kind of man. As they travelled to the place of other tribes, they danced and worshipped Malo. The place where they worshipped him was called “Las.”

To our ancestors, Malo was clearly a supernatural being. He came to Mer Island in the form of something which was familiar to our people – the octopus. This is the island context. The eight tentacles of the octopus represent the eight tribes of Mer Island. Malo strengthens the Mer Island tribes by giving laws and bringing social order. Malo established respect for living things. Malo was not needlessly destructive, so he walked on tiptoe to avoid treading on any plants.

Since my childhood, I have been taught to respect my traditional ways. I was taught that Malo never stretched his hands to steal what belongs to other people, he keeps his feet way from trespassing on other people’s land. The spiritual foundation laid down by Malo has helped my people to live together and these laws have helped our culture to survive.

Malo was the supreme being that my people worshipped before the Coming of the Light of the Gospel in 1871. The Gospel pointed us to the Father and Creator revealed to us in Jesus. We believe that God used Malo to establish Mer Island spirituality. Malo is the bridge to our understanding of God revealed to us in Christ.

That is the story of Malo.