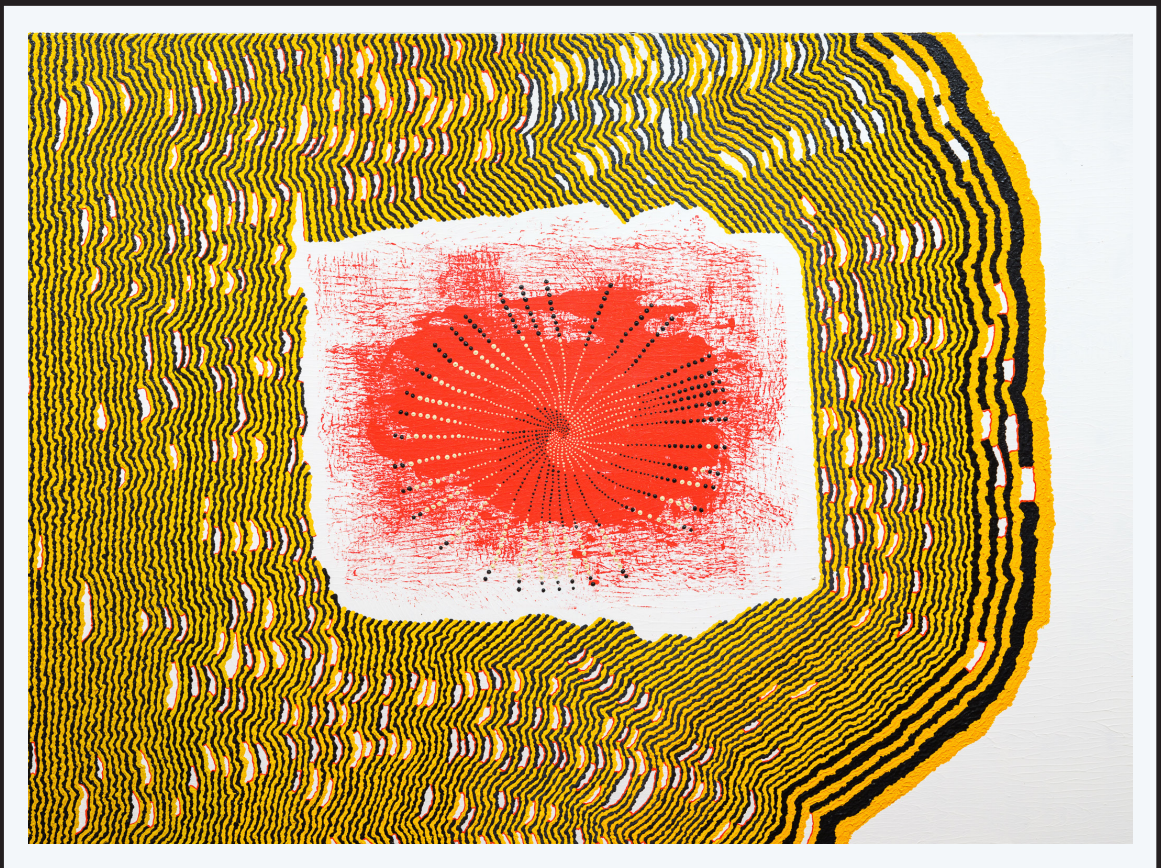


Preaching from the heart

Reflections from across Australia



'Crying Country' Glenn Loughrey

Preaching from the heart

Reflections from across Australia

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Preface

“We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.”

This beautiful sentence completes the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

The invitation is to go on pilgrimage together.

It is Australia’s Camino moment.

Pilgrimage, we know, is both an outer and an inner journey:

Physical and metaphysical.

The tradition of the Camino is that, as you journey along you will remember things best left behind. Things that weigh you down: ignorances and old resentments; acts of indifference; harsh thoughts and words; wasted earlier opportunities to learn and respect.

The tradition is to then place a stone beside the markers which show the way ahead.

Lighter, we then continue the pilgrimage towards a more delightful and more compassionate life.

These gathered Sermons are like conversations we are having on this road into a better future.

We walk a while with a particular author, appreciating what helps. Then another author comes along.

Our pilgrimage will be lightened both by words of illumination and also by those words which bring to mind something heavy in our soul, best left behind.

It is a blessing that all these authors want to help our pilgrimage.

Their integrity of intent gives us hope. They help bring into clearer view the invitation of the Uluru Statement and thus the Referendum. We can see that better future now, on the horizon up ahead.

Free to choose, like those of long ago, we “Choose life”. [Deuteronomy 30.19-20]

The promise of the One who journeys with us rings in our ears, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” [John 10.10]

Grateful for these authors, these pilgrim companions, we journey on together.

When we get there the party will go on for days!

Bishop Philip Huggins

Introduction

I thank the Editorial Team for the 'Preaching from the Heart' project for their kind invitation to offer an introduction to this anthology of sermons from preachers around the country.

The gospels often warn us to care for how we treat the least in our society. Matthew 25:31-46, for example, is a not-so-subtle warning that if we fail to treat the least in our society as we would treat Jesus Himself, we will find ourselves unwelcome in the Kingdom of God.

It is Jesus' way of telling us not to be surprised when we are held accountable for what we do, or fail to do, to the least in our community. (Reflect for a moment on that)

Before you read on, remember with me all those Aboriginal and Islander people who have gone before us:

- Those who have been subjected to the oppressive and discriminatory practices of colonisation;
- Those who have suffered and grieved as a result of the callous disregard for the humanity of Aboriginal people; and,
- Those, like William Cooper, Pastor Don Brady, and Rev. Charles Harris and who fought tirelessly for justice for Aboriginal peoples and communities.

I recognise and pay respect to those Aboriginal people who continue to fight for justice for First Peoples in this country – it is a difficult, tiring, frustrating and often heartbreaking task.

It is often a fight that feels lonely and fruitless, as the challenges and opposition sometimes seem insurmountable.

But we see glimpses of hope, as William Cooper and his colleagues must have seen following the Day of Mourning protest in 1938, following which Churches implemented the Day of Mourning service.

We saw glimpses of hope in 1967, when a referendum saw a Constitutional amendment to allow Aboriginal people to be counted as part of the Australian population.

We had glimpses of hope in 1991 when the findings of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody were released.

We saw glimpses of hope in 2008 when the Hon Kevin Rudd offered an apology to the Stolen Generations on behalf of the Australian Government.

Sadly, the latest Closing the Gap report shows the significant socio-economic disparity that continues to negatively impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples and communities.

Injustice continues.

Preventable deaths in custody continue.

Violence against Aboriginal women and children continues – along with police services and legal systems that fail to provide adequate support and protection for victims of domestic abuse.

Our young people are committing suicide at staggering and unacceptable rates.

In 2022 an innocent fifteen-year-old Aboriginal young man was attacked with a steel bar on his way home from school and died as a result of his injuries.

Australia's political, legal, health and education systems continue to fail to meet the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal peoples and communities.

Aboriginal children continue to be removed from their families at higher rates than prior to Kevin Rudd's apology to the Stole Generations.

Aboriginal people remain a dispossessed people, despite never having ceded our sovereignty. We are still fighting for a Treaty and the recognition that was denied to us through the unlawful application of the Doctrine of Terra Nullius.

Racism in Australia is alive and well – albeit these days more prevalent on social media. There seems to be no effective way to stop people vilifying and denigrating Aboriginal people on Facebook and other social media sites.

I don't understand exactly what community Facebook bases its "Community Standards" on, but it clearly isn't a community with any Aboriginal people in it!

(Reflect for a moment on that)

In 2023 we see glimpses of hope once again. We see a call for Voice, Treaty and Truth.

We see an opportunity for justice, reparations and healing.

The Statement from the Heart, in my view, represents an opportunity for the Australian nation to take genuine and effective steps to address the

injustices of the past. It is an opportunity to create a pathway for the healing of the grief and trauma that continues to haunt Aboriginal peoples as a legacy of colonial occupation.

A Voice to Parliament is a logical mechanism to enable Parliament, and the Government of the Day, to receive advice and guidance from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The Voice is non-binding, it will not be able to force the Parliament to do anything. It is not a third chamber of Parliament.

It will not affect the unceded sovereignty of Aboriginal Nations (in fact it will provide a mechanism for Aboriginal Nations to continue to advise the Government that our sovereignty has never been ceded).

A Voice to Parliament will be enacted through legislation – a process that will allow all Parties and politicians to be aware of what is proposed, to debate the content of a proposed bill, to seek amendments, and to eventually pass the bill into law through both Houses of Parliament.

Certain politicians, who claim not to have enough detail, will actually be the ones who get to determine the actual detail – through the standard Parliamentary process that applies to all legislation.

Similarly, if for some reason the Voice mechanism needs tweaking because unforeseen issues arise, it can be updated via amendments to legislation – again via the usual Parliamentary process.

In my view, the Voice is the easy element of the Statement from the Heart. I've previously described it as the "pre-game entertainment", because in my opinion, the main event is Treaty.

A Treaty is basically an agreement between two parties. It is usually thought of as an agreement between nations. We have often heard of "Peace Treaties" that are agreements made to facilitate an end to conflict between warring parties.

Governments all around the world have made Treaties with First Nations peoples – for example, the United States, Canada, and New Zealand. In fact, Australia remains the only Commonwealth Country that has not formed a Treaty with its First Peoples. Australia is also the only populated country colonised by the British via the unlawful application of the Doctrine of Terra Nullius.

I believe these two issues are connected... it was perhaps a bit embarrassing in times past, to form a Treaty with people you claimed didn't exist!

However, the Mabo High Court decision in 1992 declared that the application

of Terra Nullius to the Australian continent was a legal fiction. I think enough time has passed for this nation to move past any embarrassment and get on with righting past wrongs.

(Reflect on this for a time.)

The Statement of the Heart calls for Voice, Treaty and Truth. Prime Minister Albanese has publicly committed to fully implementing these three elements. This means that regardless of the outcome of the Voice referendum, we will then move to a process of Treaty implementation. Or perhaps Treaties, as there are many Aboriginal Nations within the Australian continent. Much like there are many Nations within the European continent.

If we think the dog whistling and scare mongering by certain politicians around the Voice has been a bit ridiculous, wait until the process of Treaty negotiation is actioned by the Albanese Government. There will be all sorts of political shenanigans and scare campaigns. There will also be a huge amount of racist “anti-Treaty” commentary on social media.

But I am here to assure you that Treaties are simply agreements. They are not scary things. Most countries have Treaties with their First Peoples. A Treaty can address substantive issues and past injustices such as dispossession, attempted genocide, and systemic discrimination and oppression. It can address these injustices through recognition, apology, reparations, land rights, and a range of practical outcomes that provide restorative justice. A Treaty cannot change the past, but it can acknowledge injustices, provide just reparations, and provide an opportunity for healing and closure.

If we think about the central message of the gospels, and if we understand how Aboriginal peoples have been dealt with throughout colonisation, including the current reality in the disparity in socio-economic status between First Peoples and other Australians, it is easy to see Aboriginal peoples as “the least”.

Jesus gives us a clear message about how we should treat the least (see the parables of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37), and the Sheep and Goats, Matthew 25: 31-46). It is for each of us to decide how we act, how we treat the least, and how we will find ourselves on our day of judgement. It is up to each of us to find ways to ensure we care for the least in our society. I will leave you to think about that in your own time.

Lastly, we have the element of Truth. The formation of a Makarrata or Truth Telling Commission. An agency designed to ensure the truth of Australian history is told, including the good, the bad and the ugly... and I can assure you this country has its fair share of ugly. Stuff you wouldn't want to believe, but it's true. A google search of "Aboriginal massacres" will lead you to these truths if you wish to read about some of these things. The Commission would also help to advise on, and support, the treaty process. While the truth may hurt, denying the truth is often to deny justice.

Denying or refusing to acknowledge the injustices done to a person, or a group of people is a form of injustice in itself. As Christians we are compelled to act justly, without fear, and with faith that God will be with us. We are compelled to defend the poor, the weak, and the oppressed – just as Jesus did.

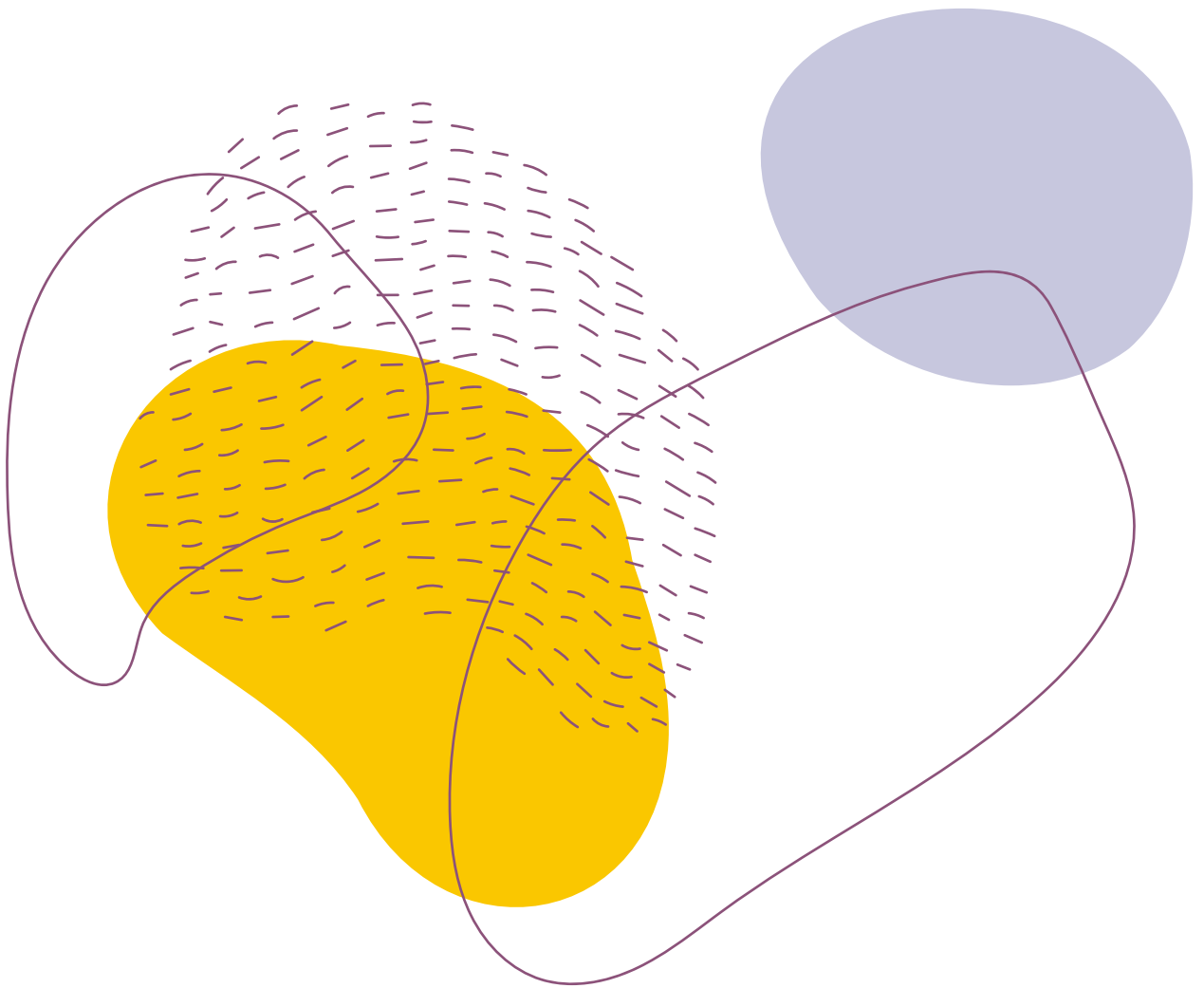
Every year at services for the Day of Mourning, we should ask this question: Is listening to a scripture reading sufficient evidence of our faith – or are we required to live our faith through our actions?

As you read the sermons in this collection, I encourage you to learn about the history of this country, to take the time to build respectful relationships with First Peoples, and to support the sovereignty and right to self-determination of Aboriginal peoples.

Voice is good. Truth is good. Treaty now.

May peace be with you.

The text for this Introduction is based on a sermon preached by Nathan Tyson, at Leichardt Uniting Church, NSW, 22nd January 2023.



Sermons

Stop Talking and Listen

Text: Matthew 15:21-28

One of the traps the church often falls into in its preaching of the Bible is to paint Jesus as a sort of post-Jew, that is, someone who was raised in the Jewish faith, but who was rather more woke about everything, and who saw the world and humanity in a more sophisticated way than his home community. This lends itself to anti-Semitic views in the church, when we assume that by following Jesus, we are similarly more woke and sophisticated in thinking and theology than those backward Jewish people. Think about the normative way we read Scripture. Jesus-following Jews: good. Pharisee Jews, Sadducee Jews, Zealot Jews: bad. Gentiles: ugh. These are unconscious biases that shape how we read the stories of Scripture.

But the truth is that Jesus was fully and completely a Jew, living and interacting as a Jewish man. Mary and Joseph raised Jesus to be a man of Jewish faith: to attend synagogue, to listen to rabbis, to follow the Torah, and so on. And to be raised Jewish in the time of Jesus, when Jerusalem was under the rule of Rome, was to be raised to be proud of one's Jewish heritage. "Adonai is on our side (Psalm 118:6), and justice will come to our oppressors (Psalm 103:6); thank God we are Jews (Deut. 14:12)." But the longer Jesus' community was in this situation of oppression and subjugation, the more they would have self-identified as God's chosen, God's beloved, worthy of God's grace. To self-differentiate from others, it would have been easy to self-identify as chosen as opposed to non-Jews, that is Gentiles. This is a hop, skip and jump from concluding that non-Jews are to be avoided, despised and shunned.

This is racism. Race is a social construct that people use to organise social life, and it exists everywhere. The concept of race is the way one community structures material relationships: economical, social, and political, on the basis of skin colour. It is part of the way different societies value some bodies and allows them to have more privileges than others: men more than women, white skins more than black, able bodies more than disabled... Jew

and Gentile. One way this played out in Jesus' time was adherence to laws around kosher food and who Jews can and cannot eat with. These laws were crucial components of their endeavours to maintain a distinctive Jewish identity in their pluralistic Greco-Roman world.

It is into just such a set of understandings that the Canaanite woman, or, in Luke's version, the Syrophenician woman, speaks. She has come to Jesus, not seeking a meal, but seeking help to heal her daughter who is tormented by a demon. But Jesus paid her no attention, while his disciples urged him to dismiss her as they would a mosquito. Jesus tries by saying his ministry is only to his own people, but this does not placate or shame her enough to leave. So then sharing food, being such a major symbol of the boundaries that separated her as a Gentile woman from him as a Jewish man, quickly becomes the metaphor for the negotiation of their relationship. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Yikes. It sounds shockingly offensive to our ears, but it probably wouldn't have raised an eyebrow at the time. The understanding was that the gifts of God are for the chosen people of God, and those gifts were dishonoured if they were shared with those who are "not worthy", the outsiders, the excluded, the excommunicated. Remember too, Canaanites were First Peoples on that land; the woman's ancestors inhabited the land Jesus lives, works and worships on, before the Israelites came out of Egypt and "colonised" these lands.

Who do we identify with in this story today, on this Day of Mourning, as we reflect and mourn the vast differences in opportunity and health between First and Second peoples in Australia? Friends, this is one Sunday where I encourage us to identify with Jesus – which is usually a pretty heady, ego-boosting feeling, but not today. Our primary school curriculums, our federal laws, our Centrelink and dole systems, our healthcare systems and so on, place us as Second Peoples as chosen, superior, more worthy, more useful and, in the words of Animal Farm, more equal than First Peoples. Subconsciously or consciously, we are raised to give thanks for White Australia, for the opportunities gained through colonisation and the flicking away of First Peoples as we would a pesky mosquito. We are complicit in or actively promote systems that place us in the land of opportunity and fair go, and place First Peoples somewhere else, out of sight and mind. If we do think about changing these systems of oppression, more often than not we consider First Peoples as victims to be saved

through our mercy and charity, as incapable of learning, as child-like, needing to be looked after, as people at the bottom of the Great Chain of Humanity, to be treated as curiosities like kangaroos or platypuses. Poor, dirty, uncivilized Aboriginal people. We, all of us, are Jesus in this story.

But that's not the end of today's gospel story.

The Canaanite woman answered him, "Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." In that culture, the woman has taken a huge risk here. She is a First Nations Gentile (problem) woman (problem) facing a Jewish male rabbi (whose ancestors occupied her people's land for centuries), and she dares to speak back to him, taking his own words and turning them back on him, as she persists in calling him to do something he has already refused to do for her. And what she is doing with her daring backchat is suggesting that Adonai's table is not really so closed, but that people like her, people long excluded, have not the privilege, but the right to come to it and expect to be able to receive, and eat, and be satisfied.

And Jesus says to her, "Great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And the woman's child was healed.

We are understandably shocked at Jesus calling the woman a dog... sounds pretty racist to me... but in his day, the big shock in the story would have been that this male Jewish rabbi would concede an argument to a presumptuous Gentile woman, and that he would not only concede it, but commend her for it. Jesus is recognising, and so calling us as his followers to recognise, that we have much to learn from those who know the experience of being excluded. It is crucial to our understanding of Jesus that we see how fully he entered into the experience of the excommunicated, the outcasts, the different-to-us. Jesus stopped talking, listened to a woman he actively excluded and looked down on, and his worldview was changed.

So, for us as disciples of this same Jesus, if we want to talk about reconciliation and moving forward as one Australian people, we CANNOT come with a colonialist, woke, sophisticated mindset and try to impose it on future plans. We need to stop talking over First Peoples, listen, and really seek to understand from their experience of being Australian today. In the same way, we are sure to miss the point, if we argue and debate about

the place of LGBTIQ+ people at the Table of God's love without opening ourselves to real conversation with the LGBTIQ+ people in our midst and listening to the insights born of their experience of the church's exclusions and hostilities. Or, if we want to explore questions of our relationship to peoples of other faiths, we'll be talking in ignorant circles if we don't make friends with some Muslim or Hindu or, hey, Jewish neighbours and listen and learn what it is like to be "other" in a country where being people of faith is normally assumed to mean Christian. Jesus invites us to join him in allowing ourselves to be taught by those whose experience has been of exclusion by the powerful – and by recognising that we are the powerful.

Friends, this is really hard, for everyone. This is partly because hearing the realities of the oppressed as true is particularly difficult for those of privilege, to accept a foreign reality without demanding qualifications, to stop talking and listen without interrupting, to hear without working our experiences into the dominant narratives within us. It's hard, because it begins by confronting our own brokenness and incompleteness, our own knee-jerk responses to the "dogs" of our world and the ways we perpetuate oppression. When we do that work, we become responsible for our attitudes and actions. And then we choose, and continue to choose whether we will be elitist or not.

When we stop talking and listen to women, we hear the reality of everyday fear we face that we will be the next Eurydice Dixon. When we stop talking and listen to hijab-wearing Muslim women, we hear how scared many are to walk down the street, for fear of being screamed at to go home, or worse. When we stop talking and listen to African-American people, we hear stories of generations of race relations: slavery defined blacks as less than human; Jim Crow laws defined them as second-class citizens, and the present mass incarceration crisis defines them as criminals.

Closer to home, when we stop talking and listen, we hear how policies of assimilation, the refusal to acknowledge First Peoples' lives in the Australian Constitution, and the stolen children, name them as non-people who should disappear; that the mass incarceration of Aboriginal people, and the excuse for the Intervention name them as criminals; the continuing removal of children name them as bad parents; the closure of communities and removal of support for homelands labels them as leaners rather than lifters; and the racism around Adam Goodes tells them that they are to know their place and not get uppity.

When we stop talking and listen, we hear that the church in Australia is built on stolen land, Indigenous land, and shares in a history of racism, massacre, abuse, stolen children, imprisonment and death in custody, and ongoing disadvantage. We hear that this legacy is really ours because we have explained, justified or remained silent in the face of this reality. When we stop talking and listen, we make space to realise anew that we have acted in ways that deny the worth of some of God's people, equally made in God's image, and that Jesus is found amongst the most marginalized (according to Matthew 25), and in Australia, this means amongst First Peoples.

When we stop talking and listen, we hear why the date of Australia Day is so problematic for First Peoples, and why changing it wouldn't be a cosmetic fix, but would be another step in the direction we want to go, following other steps like the National Apology for Stolen Generations, or the Bringing Them Home Report, and so on. We hear why beginning worship with an Acknowledgement of Country is important in forming us as humble disciples in Australia, impatient for God's justice to reign, but recognising that the Kingdom is both here and coming, and our role is to work for that Kingdom – where ALL people, deserving and undeserving, understanding and ignorant, young and old, straight and gay, local and foreigner, black and white, Jew and Gentile – are welcome at God's table of love and mercy and reconciliation and life.

And when we stop talking and listen, we hear a large level of agreement from First Peoples around the Uluru Statement from the Heart, constitutional recognition, and the Voice to Parliament. We hear what voting yes says to First People, and what voting no says.

Be Christ, friends. Stop talking, and listen. Amen.

*The sermon on which this text is based was preached by
Rev. Radhika Sukumar-White at Leichhardt Uniting Church, NSW
19th January 2020 (Day of Mourning).*



Learning from our history

Texts: Isaiah 61:1-4 and John 18:33-38

The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) has requested that each Uniting Church congregation devote their worship service on the Sunday immediately before Australia Day to reflect upon and lament the effects of colonisation upon this nation's First Peoples, and to listen to the wisdom of First Nations people in their struggle for justice.¹

This is what we are attempting to do today. It's an awkward and uncomfortable conversation, but one that the Uniting Church is committed to having, based on our covenant with the UAICC. It's a conversation that many people in our nation seem unwilling or unprepared to have.

I find this a challenging day to preach ... as I am a white fella trying to speak about issues that matter deeply to Indigenous people. I've spent a long time thinking about what to say today. So, where to start? I want to start by talking about history.

We know that history is a study of the past. But when we think about Australian history, which parts of the past are worthwhile studying? When I was at school we started with Captain Cook, then moved on to some of the famous explorers, the gold rush and Federation and that was about it. There was no mention of Indigenous history at all. No mention of conflict or dispossession or entrenched racism.

History is based on facts ... but rarely just plain facts. The facts of history need to be placed in a context of what was going on at the time. The facts need to be interpreted ... but by whom? Ideally by people who were there at the time ... eye-witnesses ... but even then, different eye-witnesses can interpret the same event very differently. So our sense of history depends on who we listen to. And also which events we pay attention to ... and how these events are to be interpreted, especially when these are contested.

It's time for an example. In November 2020 there was a Federal election held in the US. The sitting President was Donald Trump, a Republican, and his opponent was Joe Biden, a Democrat. Now the 'plain facts' are that

Biden won the election with 51% of the popular vote to Trump's 47% and in the uniquely American way of deciding the result, Biden got 306 Electoral College votes to Trump's 232. So a clear win to Biden either way.

But these 'facts' have been disputed by Trump ever since voting day, when Trump claimed that he had actually won the election, even before all the votes were counted. Trump then launched many lawsuits claiming electoral fraud had been committed, that the counting was rigged and that the election had been 'stolen' from him. To this day, Trump keeps referring to the election as 'The Big Lie', claiming that he really won. Yet there is no evidence of widespread fraud or false counts.

To a neutral observer it is clear that Biden won the election fair and square. Yet by repeating the Big Lie so many times, a significant majority of Republican voters believe that Trump actually won the 2020 election and that the result is fraudulent. Their interpretation of history is vastly different to what the 'facts' support. Sadly, many of Trump's supporters who believe this alternative view of history are white, conservative Christians.

So, along with Pilate in today's reading from John's Gospel, we might ask 'What is truth?' in such a contested space? If someone repeats a lie loudly enough and often enough, does that somehow make it true? How can such a brazen lie be accepted as true by so many intelligent people?

Perhaps history is not just about truth then, but also about power. You see, history tends to be written by the winners, those who hold power. And for Trump and his white conservative followers, power is what they are desperate to hang on to. So any facts that stop them holding on to power must be lies or 'fake news'. Those who crave power often resort to violence to hold onto their power. So it was not surprising to see the mob of Trump supporters storm the US Parliament last January to try and hold onto power.

So much for recent American history. What of Australian history? Nearly all Australian history that we white settlers have heard or read was written by the winners, those descended from the European colonialists.

For nearly 200 years, this has been the 'Three Cheers' view of Australian history, that despite some initial, relatively minor conflicts with Indigenous

people, the history of Australia is one of heroic achievement of which we can be rightly proud (which reflects the view of former Prime Minister John Howard).² Early European settlers were guided by humane intent towards Indigenous people and besides, we in our generation didn't commit any injustice(!) so it's better to forget the past and move on towards a bright future for the country.

An alternative view of Australian history that became known as the 'black armband' view takes seriously the violence of the early conflicts between colonists and Indigenous people and the ongoing effects of massacres, dispossession, mistreatment in the missions and under 'Aboriginal Protection' legislation – including the stolen generations – and cultural repression. The symbolism of wearing a black armband, as football players do from time to time, is to remember and acknowledge those who have died. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activists remind us that the sovereignty of these lands now called Australia was never ceded to the British and that the land always was and always will be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land.³

We heard earlier in the service from Wurundjeri Elder Colin Hunter that the Wurundjeri population was reduced to just 124 people by 1860, one generation after John Batman first arrived in the Melbourne area. Although it's hard to accurately estimate the numbers of Indigenous people living in this area before colonisation, it's clear that the population was decimated through a combination of disease, conflict and dispossession.

So what is a true interpretation of our history?

Does it fit somewhere in the middle of these two extremes?

And how does it affect our sense of national identity?

... and our sense of justice?

In the words of former South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, there can be no peace without justice:

The Bible knows nothing about peace without justice, for that would be crying 'peace, peace,' where there is no peace. God's peace, Shalom, involves righteousness, justice, wholesomeness, fullness of life, participation in decision making, goodness, laughter, joy, compassion, sharing, and reconciliation.⁴

It was on this basis that Tutu chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa that invited both white and black South

Africans to share their experiences of violence and oppression, because reconciliation requires truth to be told and justice to be enacted.

One way of thinking about the good news declared in the New Testament is reconciliation, a metaphor used by the apostle Paul (e.g. 2 Cor 5:16-20) that captures our need to be restored to right relationship with God and with one another. It seems to me that in conversations around Indigenous history, we Second Peoples are drawn to the language and concept of reconciliation. Yet the language that I mostly hear from First Peoples is their desire for truth and justice. As both Tutu and the Uluru Statement from the Heart recognise, there can be no peace and reconciliation without the telling of truth and the acting out of justice.

Does Australia need some sort of similar Truth and Reconciliation Commission to allow reconciliation and peace to arise between the First Peoples of this land and the Second Peoples – those who have migrated here from overseas or who are descendants of immigrants, namely, all of us here today?

Indigenous people clearly think so. After two years of consultation up and down the country, the First Nations National Constitutional Convention met in 2017 at Uluru, the spiritual heart of the country, and agreed to the Uluru Statement from the Heart that was presented to the Federal Government in August of that year. Perhaps you have heard of this Statement or perhaps read it? I have made copies of the full Statement. I encourage you to take one and read it.

In part the Statement reads:

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future. These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is the torment of our powerlessness.

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.

Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: the coming together after a struggle. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.

We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.

In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. ... We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.

This cry from the physical and spiritual heart of Australia is not far from the cry in Isaiah 61 that we heard earlier, a cry to bring good news to the oppressed, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to comfort those who mourn, to build up the ancient ruins, to repair the devastations of many generations and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. This is the passage quoted by Jesus when he first preaches at Nazareth, and which will be our focus next week.

In Isaiah it is the prophet speaking. Today, the voice bringing the message of hope and justice is the Indigenous people who have courageously put together the Statement from the Heart. It is their cry to be heard, their cry for a better future for their children. But for this to happen there are a few steps that must be taken: their voice must be heard, truth needs to be spoken about our history and justice and self-determination pursued. The first step is what the Voice is about, namely being heard and taken seriously. The second step is the proposed Makarrata Commission that is similar to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission – an opportunity to speak openly and truthfully about our history. If we are to move forward together as First and Second Peoples in this country we need to be bold enough to grasp this opportunity before us.

And yet within two months of receiving this united call from First Nations people, our then Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, rejected the statement, claiming that 'The government does not believe such a radical change to our Constitution ... has any realistic prospect of being supported in a

referendum'.⁵ End of story. Once again, white people in power apparently know what's best for Indigenous people.

The current government led by Scott Morrison has also rejected a constitutionally enacted Voice to Parliament, preferring a legislated model with local, regional and national voices to advise all levels of government. Morrison did commit the government to holding a referendum on recognition of Indigenous people in the Constitution, but this has not happened.⁶

As I said earlier, those who write history tend to be those who hold the power – in this case the current Coalition government. They have made some encouraging noises about a Voice process but not yet allowed the country to have a say in a referendum. Two key elements in the statement from the Heart – the need for truth-telling about our history and the need to pursue justice – have not been taken up.

My view, based on my reading of Scripture, is that God desires both justice and reconciliation, and teaches that both truth and grace are necessary for peace. So just as Jesus stood in solidarity with the marginalised of his day, as Christians we are called to stand with those on the edges in our day, which includes the First Peoples of this country, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, which is why we acknowledge their history and their claims each time we gather for worship and commit ourselves to continue walking with them in their search for justice. The question for us is whether we are prepared to walk the walk as well as talk the talk.

Perhaps children can show us the way. Primary school children in Broome, First Peoples and Second Peoples, gathered to sing together – using each other's languages, walking together towards a better future as the Statement from the Heart puts it. Let's have a listen ...

We will then sing a song inviting us to look for signs of hope – new songlines – as we follow the way of God's Spirit.

*The sermon on which this text is based was preached by
Rev Dr Peter Mallen at Croydon North Uniting Church, Victoria
on Sunday 23 January 2022.*

Listening from the Heart

Texts: Jeremiah 31. 27-34; 2 Timothy 3.14-4.5; Luke 18.1-8

Over recent years I've learnt to listen, or do my best to listen, to what our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander neighbours are saying to us. It's difficult because it doesn't come naturally to non-Indigenous Australians, and because Indigenous people, like people everywhere, don't always agree with one another. Mostly it's difficult because what I find myself hearing from Indigenous people reflects a whole different view of the world from what I've been used to, what I've been brought up with. But there are some commonalities that I notice, some common priorities.

The way I heard it put a week or so ago by Gina Williams, a Nyoongar musician and song writer from Western Australia, was this: there are four principles we, the rest of us, have to understand about Aboriginal reality (and she used the Nyoongar words for these).

First, Country, which includes all elements of homeland, including geographical features, the sky and sea, the animals, and plants.

Second, there is Kinship, which means your origins, your ancestors, and relatives, both living and no longer living, your community. Taken together these two principles are encapsulated in the question, she explained, that Aboriginal people ask one another when they first meet: 'Where're you from? Who's you mob?'

There's a third principle: Legacy, and that means children, the importance of what we leave to our children, with the idea that we leave Country as we found it, we maintain it, keep it 'open'; that we don't damage it, we don't dig it up or cover it in concrete.

I think we're probably familiar with these ideas nowadays. Country, ancestors, and those who come after us. And they have some resonance for us as Christians, I think: the communion of saints that we affirm in the creed refers to those of our community who have died; and we also have sacred spaces, places that are intrinsically important to us and to our identity: we only have to remember the old hymn that's unfortunately no

longer in our hymnbooks, 'we love the place, O God, wherein thine honour dwells.' But these three principles are actually numbers 2, 3 and 4 in the list offered by Gina. Number one, she said, is Heart. Before these others can be right for us, our hearts have to be right. We have to know our own hearts, and be at peace with them, and entrust them to the right people. Our heart designates our innermost being, that thing that's central to everything we have been, are, and hope to be.

The First nations elders gathered at Uluru, a few years ago now, gave us a Statement from the Heart, and this was meant in two ways: it was formulated at Uluru, the geographical heart of the country; and it was given from the heart as an expression of the deepest desires of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who formulated it and presented it to the rest of us. They were entrusting their own heartfelt desires, to us, to the Australian people and nation. And we, or at least our elected representatives at the time, weren't very receptive to these heartfelt desires. As a nation we didn't listen, even though these desires were not unreasonable, and were put to us politely. I'm hoping we're now gradually becoming more receptive, and better at listening.

Now I'm not saying all this just because I happened to have this interesting conversation a couple of weeks ago, but because today's readings reminded me of it. Today's readings are all about Heart.

In Jeremiah, written during the Babylonian captivity of the Israelite people, they are promised a new covenant, a new agreement with God that doesn't have to be learnt or imposed, because it will come from the heart; it will reflect the deepest desires of the covenant people. It will not be written on stone, like the old law, or even on paper, which can still come across as an imposition ('the letter of the law'), but it'll be inscribed on and in the heart; it will be something taken to heart. The Uluru Statement from the Heart also invites us in this country to enter into a new type of covenant between First Peoples and newcomers, a law that will not be imposed but a journey that we will set out on together. 'We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.'

In 2 Timothy, the recipient of the letter, and we ourselves, are counselled to 'persuade, rebuke, encourage, with the utmost patience...' We are to be encouragers, and encouragement is about the core, the heart, of our being

and the core, the heart of the person whom we are encouraging. It will be a heart-to-heart matter, offered with utmost patience. It will be a sharing of the heart, and a reception from the heart.

And then we come to the gospel, a parable that Jesus told to encourage his disciples, 'to pray always and not to lose heart.' Not to become dis-couraged (as Today's English Version puts it), and this means the same thing of course: not to lose touch with our core; the core of our being.

There was a judge, in this parable, a powerful man who neither feared God nor respected people. The first recipients of Luke's gospel knew all about such legislators and arbitrators and enforcers of the law, from their own experience. Unjust judges. A widow, a woman with no other advocate to support her cause, begs for justice. Because she is persistent, because she keeps on asking, the judge finally gives her justice. The parable is told to assure us that God is more responsive than this unjust judge, to those who cry for justice, and in fact will respond quickly to their cries.

The Statement from the Heart is a cry for justice, from the most disadvantaged people in this country. The Statement spells this out very clearly:

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers.

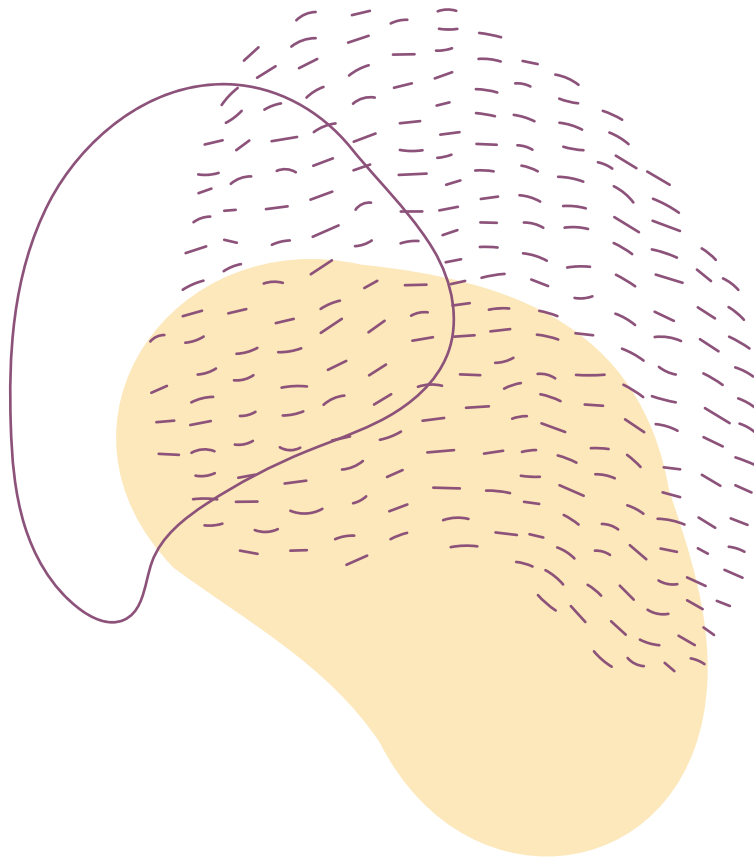
The message of today's gospel is not to lose heart: not to be discouraged, and also not to be hard-hearted. Let's not, as a nation, continue to act out of the disregard and disrespect and indeed the arrogance and hard-heartedness of the unjust judge. We've done enough of that in the past. Nor can we escape the responsibility to persuade and rebuke those in power when we see them judging unjustly. And when we are disadvantaged, we should not lose heart. God will act, quickly.

The Statement from the Heart offers us the opportunity to act with justice, here in this country, now in our time. It asks us, as a first step, for a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution, a Voice that no government will feel at liberty to ignore. It is a request that cannot be silenced; a request

we are bound to listen to. It has been put to us 'with the utmost patience,' as an invitation. Let's not miss this opportunity or turn down this invitation. Indigenous voices are already making themselves heard; Indigenous people are here to stay.

Let's listen, from our hearts, to what the elders who gathered at Uluru are saying to us from their hearts. Let's respond with the same generosity of spirit and the same graciousness of heart.

*The sermon on which this text is based was preached by
Rev. Dr. Duncan Reid at Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Pascoe Vale,
Victoria
16th October 2022: Pentecost 19.*



Learning to listen

Texts: Psalm 19:1-4 and John 10:1-6

I always enjoy the challenge of preparing the message for Aboriginal Sunday, which in the Uniting Church tradition is the Sunday that falls immediately prior to 26 January. This year the day has a greater significance due to the referendum that will be happening later in the year on an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament. Each year, as I prepare, I'm conscious that I am a non-Indigenous person speaking about Indigenous issues, so I have plenty of scope to get things wrong. With that in mind, let us pray:

O Lord, our rock and our redeemer,
may the words of my mouth
and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable to you this day. Amen.

Something that sets humans apart from other creatures is the multitude of ways we have learned to communicate with each other: through spoken words and written words, through pictures and art and dance, and through technology like phones, radio, television, email, Instagram, zoom and so on. Sometimes, though, we struggle to communicate because we don't speak the language of someone else. Maybe you've had the experience of travelling overseas and not understanding a word anyone else was saying and desperately looking around for someone who speaks English. Or sometimes the language we speak is banned. For those who grew up in Scotland or Ireland or Wales, were you or others banned from speaking Gaelic or Welsh? This form of silencing language was widely applied to Indigenous people growing up in Australia.⁷

The Scriptures suggest, however, that God is never silenced but rather speaks in many different ways, if only we have ears to hear. So in the psalm we read just now, God speaks through creation, which reveals God's glory and God's work of design and beauty. The psalm tells us that God speaks every day and every night through creation, all over the earth, yet without using words or speech. Yet many people are too busy or preoccupied to listen to what God is saying through creation. By contrast, the Indigenous

peoples of the world are highly attuned to the voice of God in and through creation. Their stories tell of how different animals, birds and natural features of the landscape came into being. Here in Australia, the traditions about how to care for country and how to live sustainably on country have much to teach us (e.g. through the Indigenous learning centre of Narana Creations, near Geelong).

Although the Indigenous peoples of this country have lived in harmony with creation for thousands of generations, when European colonists arrived in Australia they viewed aboriginals as primitive and inferior and as having little visible attachment to the land, lacking the farms or gardens or permanent villages that the Europeans were used to seeing. How wrong were all these assumptions! Aboriginal people did indeed have close ties to the land, but did not view the land as something to be owned and fenced off and treated as personal property. The idea that Australia was terra nullius, an empty land, before the colonists arrived was another fantasy, yet one that emboldened the colonists to think that they could just take whatever land they liked from the Indigenous peoples.

Hence most of the early struggles and conflicts with First Nations people in Australia were about land: access to the land and use of the land. The colonists wanted exclusive use of the land for their sheep and cattle to graze on and didn't want to share the land with the local people. Settlers and squatters were brutal in murdering and chasing away native peoples who tried to defend their land. Hence the long history of conflict and dispossession, the massacres and frontier wars that lasted for 150 years in various parts of Australia as white settlers fought to take Indigenous land.

Most Australians are quite ignorant regarding this history of conflict and the so-called 'Frontier Wars', even when such conflicts occurred close to where we live. Here in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, most of us don't know the stories and exploits of significant Aboriginal heroes like Jaga Jaga and William Barak who both lived in the Yarra Valley. But these wars and massacres and sacrifices are remembered by First Nations people. It forms part of their story, their identity and their trauma. Telling these stories is part of the truth-telling that Indigenous people seek. But we non-Indigenous peoples of this country have been slow to listen.

The opening verses of the book of Hebrews remind us that God had been speaking to the Jewish people for centuries, in many and various

ways through the prophets, but now has spoken to us through his Son, Jesus Christ. Our reading from the Gospel of John takes up this theme by reminding us that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the one who leads the flock to pasture. The sheep hear his voice and follow the shepherd because they know his voice, but will run from a stranger because they don't know the voice of a stranger.

What does the voice of Jesus say to us, his followers? One of the most important things that Jesus says is that we are to love God and to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. Loving our neighbour has many aspects but includes listening to them, respecting them, showing kindness and compassion, helping to meet their needs if that is requested and letting them live in peace. Clearly we, the non-Indigenous peoples of Australia, have not loved the Indigenous peoples as our neighbour. In our ignorance and in our arrogance we have driven them from their land, kidnapped, raped and murdered their women, sent them to remote mission stations far away from their land and waited for them to die out. We have also taken away and locked up their children and banned them from speaking their own languages. More recently the Federal Government sent the military into the Northern Territory to disrupt the lives of Aboriginal people (the so-called NT Intervention in 2007). The sorry list goes on and on. We non-Indigenous peoples have so often acted as a patronising guardian who thinks they know best. Sadly, our forebears in the church were complicit in many of these unloving actions.

And then in 2017 along comes the Uluru Statement from the Heart, the direct result of a gathering of 250 Indigenous delegates from around Australia meeting at the heart of the country at Uluru and sharing different views and eventually reaching a consensus on what various Indigenous communities around Australia agree on and what they want from governments.⁸ The Statement gently but strongly insists that the sovereignty of the land was never ceded by Indigenous people and never extinguished by the colonisers. As the Indigenous slogan goes, 'Always was, always will be, Aboriginal land'. This remains an inconvenient truth for we non-Indigenous peoples, but is why we include an acknowledgement of country at the start of our service each week. We acknowledge that we do indeed live and work and worship on Aboriginal land, land that in fact belongs to Aboriginal people.

The Uluru Statement speaks of the desire of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander people to seek some say over their own destiny through a 'Voice' to Parliament which would be enshrined in the Constitution. This is what the referendum later this year is about, providing a permanent and guaranteed voice to the Federal Parliament on matters that affect Indigenous people, a voice that could never be axed or repealed by the next hostile government who finds it inconvenient. This desire seems entirely reasonable to me, especially in the light of all the cruel and misguided decisions that have been made over the decades on behalf of Indigenous people by non-Indigenous Australian politicians.

The Uluru Statement goes on to also seek a truth-telling 'Makarrata Commission' and 'treaties', but the Voice is the first priority because treaties take a long time to be negotiated and may be vulnerable to the whims of the Federal Government, while a Voice in the Constitution is permanent and can immediately impact outcomes in housing, health, child welfare and so forth, not least by providing an Indigenous representative body that the government can start to work with.

The Uluru Statement concludes by noting that Indigenous people were counted as Australians for the first time in 1967 but now seek to be heard. In a sign of grace and generosity, the statement invites all Australians to walk with the Indigenous peoples in a movement of the whole Australian people for a better future.

One of the delegates to the Uluru conference was Thomas Mayo, a Torres Strait Islander man but who has mostly lived in Darwin. In his book *Finding the Heart of the Nation*, he interviews many of the delegates who helped put the Uluru Statement together as well as other Indigenous leaders and asks that their voices and their stories be heard. He also addresses some of the common questions and fears about what a Voice to Parliament might include or imply. What shines through, in story after story, is the sense of injustice, racism and disrespect that so many Indigenous people have experienced and continue to experience today.

It seems to me that the Uluru Statement is a cry to be heard but also a generous invitation to walk together on a journey whose destination is not fully visible at this point. It sounds a bit like the journey of faith. But even while Thomas Mayo was taking the Uluru Statement to various Indigenous communities around the country for their endorsement, the

political argy-bargy in Canberra was already underway. I won't go into all the messy details but just highlight the following responses from our leaders.

- Then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull quickly dismissed the whole statement
- The next Prime Minister Scott Morrison also rejected the statement, instead working towards a model for a legislated Voice rather than one enshrined in the Constitution
- Our current Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has given strong support to the statement and made a referendum on the Voice a high priority for this term of government
- Current leader of the National Party, David Littleproud, quickly indicated his party's opposition to the Voice before even seeing the final form of the proposal
- Current leader of the Liberal Party, Peter Dutton, appears to be seeking every opportunity to stoke doubt and division
- And finally there are the Greens, who support the proposed Voice but wanted Treaty and Truth-telling to come first

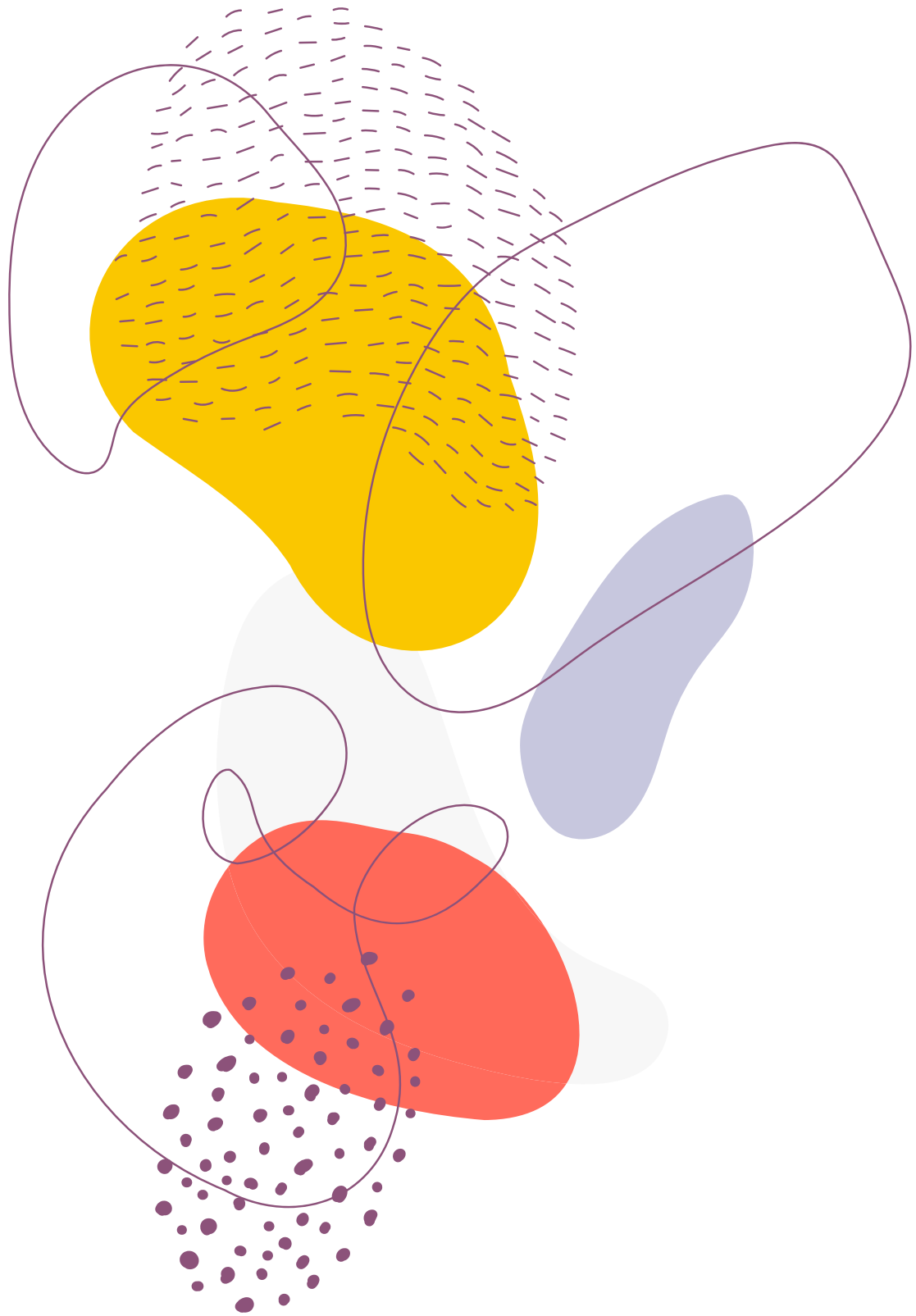
What we have seen from our political leaders is a clear demonstration of why an Indigenous Voice to Parliament is so needed. Most of these leaders are not listening to the voices of Indigenous people. They either have not heard their cry and their invitation or are choosing to reject it, thinking they know better regarding what Indigenous people need.

It seems to me that the Indigenous people of Australia have spoken. There may be further conversation needed around the detail, but the clear desire is for a Voice enshrined in the Constitution, and for treaty and truth-telling, in that order.

As Australians, are we listening? Are we actually hearing what is being asked? And will we respect and embrace the heart-felt cry of our Indigenous brothers and sisters and walk this journey with them?

Later this year, we will all have the opportunity to express our view one way or the other.

*The sermon on which this text is based was preached by
Rev Dr Peter Mallen at Croydon North Uniting Church, Victoria
on Sunday 22 January 2023.*



The Beatitudes and the Statement from the Heart

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

Amanda Gorman, in her poem read at President Biden's inauguration said:

. . . being American is more than a pride we inherit,
it's the past we step into
and how we repair it.⁹

I suggest that an aptitude for repair will help us to move forward through the controversy and misinformation surrounding the upcoming referendum on Constitutional Recognition and an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to parliament. For Anglicans in the Anglo-Catholic tradition, this call to repair can be found in our regular practice of Eucharist. In what follows, I will suggest that careful attention to the ebb and flow of the mass might form Christian people for a positive engagement with the proposals at hand.

When I was working with a senior priest in the early days of my ministry, he would often say that the liturgy has two high points, two obvious humps of the camel so to speak: The Word, of which this sermon is a part, and the Eucharist, which includes the Great Thanksgiving prayer. The first 'hump' opens our understanding and reveals what the Spirit of God has to say in the Scriptural text as written, in both its own social and historical context and in how it might speak, again, to the times in which we live. It is vital to our becoming mature Christian people. The liturgy of the Word has a *Voice*. It is the *Voice of God speaking into our world*.

The second 'hump', the Eucharist, with the Great Thanksgiving prayer at its centre, is just as that name would suggest. It is the place in our service when we give thanks for the incarnation of the Christ and recognise the blessing we share therein, even though it is not ours by right. It is the place where we receive and practice what the authors of the Statement from the Heart call '*makarrata – the coming together after a struggle*'. It is the celebration of a blessing that comes our way through a costly encounter between Christ and the colonial powers of his day. A blessing that cost him his very life.

For many within our tradition, these are the two immovable objects of our worship, not to be tampered with or left out. They are the core of our worship and faith. Allow me to suggest, however, that this is not all that is happening in the liturgy. There is more. It seems to me that by raising these two elements to the highest places in our worship, we oftentimes flatten and minimise others important parts of both the liturgy and our day-to-day practice as a community of faith.

Between, sometimes before, these two elements sit the Affirmation or Creed, the place where we agree on what we believe. The saying of the Creed is a practise which allows us to be together in agreement on some important things, even as there are many other things, less important things we might say, that draw us apart. The Creed is therefore a form of treaty, a codified narrative or story around which our togetherness or unity is built.

Then, in our communal prayers of intercession, Voice appears again. This time it is our voice, individually and communally expressing gratitude, longing, lament, and oftentimes daring to remind God of the promises made which, as yet, appear to have borne little fruit. At this point, our voice is like that of the Psalms in which the Jewish people felt free to express even their anger at God in the face of betrayal, suffering and oppression.

In the Book of Common Prayer's approach to the rite, the prayers are immediately followed by confession or *truth telling* regarding our failures. Not, it should be said, those of individuals concerning private sins. Rather, we offer a general confession of our communal and societal failure to do what is good. Without an effective understanding of this lament for the failures of our society, and ourselves as part of that society, then there can be no open heart to either the Word or the blessings of the Eucharist. Without confession and absolution there remains only a sense of entitlement and privilege. In fact, this communal reflection on the way we really live and our response to the Voice heard in Scripture forms our readiness to celebrate in the Eucharist or *makarrata*. A sobering thought. If our lamentation at the failure of society and ourselves as part of that society is superficial and fleeting, then we may not be entitled to celebrate either individually or as a community.

The repentance called for by John the Baptist and Jesus was not simply an individual one. There was no preference for the individual. Whatever had happened in society before the birth of an individual was to be repented of and dealt with alongside contemporary sins. More communal societies, such as those we find in the bible, understood that individuals could be both beneficiaries and victims of everything that previous generations got up to. Whatever the traumas or blessings bestowed by one's membership in particular cultures, economic classes, genders or ethnicities, there is always something to be owned and dealt with before one can receive the blessing of reconciliation which is ours in Christ.

The Beatitudes has suffered the same fate as John's call for repentance in the sense that they have been reduced to an individual application and we assess ourselves and others against this credo. In context, this is a communal statement calling for an integrated set of practices for both the individual and their community in response to life in a colonised society, including the experience of poverty, bereavement, persecution, inequality, death, hatred, and more.

The Statement from the Heart and the Beatitudes have at least six things in common:

- *Voice.* Both documents call for the voice of those on the margins of society to be heard and responded to. The implication of blessing is not simply that you are blessed, lucky, or to benefit from position but that you are blessed because others who hear and see you change the way they respond to you. Your capacity to embody blessing during these difficult situations will call to those in society who can, to support and lift you up. The Statement reminds us that the First Peoples are blessed in a similar manner. Their predicament calls on those who can join them to make the changes necessary for a just and fair society for all.

In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.

- *Recognition.* What the Beatitudes do is recognise those who by the normal standards of society, secular and religious, are not seen. They recognise a wide range of people who until then had no place that was safe, or even where they might simply exist, be.

The Statement from the Heart asks that those who were here from the beginning but are now seen somehow as deficient be recognised, not only as here and existing but to be placed alongside those who came here more latterly and more violently in their foundational document. This recognition balances the scales and brings people into a sense of belonging and wholeness.

- *Truth-telling.* The Beatitudes tells the truth. They name and recognise those who have been left behind or forgotten by the dominant culture. Not only by the systems committed to the status quo but those privileged by it and prepared to allow it to continue. Jesus is holding the mirror up to society and saying “See these people. They are real and you are responsible for blessing them, making the changes so that they get to share in the same benefit and blessing you do.”

The Statement lays out the truth on two levels, in terms of sovereignty and in terms of the deficit experience of our people. The first truth is that a sovereignty that has been in place since the creation of these lands can't just be extinguished by the swipe of a pen. The second truth concerns the contemporary consequences of failing to recognise and give shape and form to this sovereignty. These consequences are catastrophic for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander well-being. Truth-telling is not comfortable.

- *Spirituality.* Both the Beatitudes and the Statement from the Heart are spiritual documents. The Beatitudes in Matthew are an unarguably spiritual statement. They remind us that justice is not a social but a spiritual question and needs to be addressed from the deep spiritual centre of a self that exists only in relationship with country. Spirituality is not the possession of an individual but the essence of being born out of country, integrally connected to all that exists on country and enlivened in the spirit by that relationship.

The Statement states clearly:

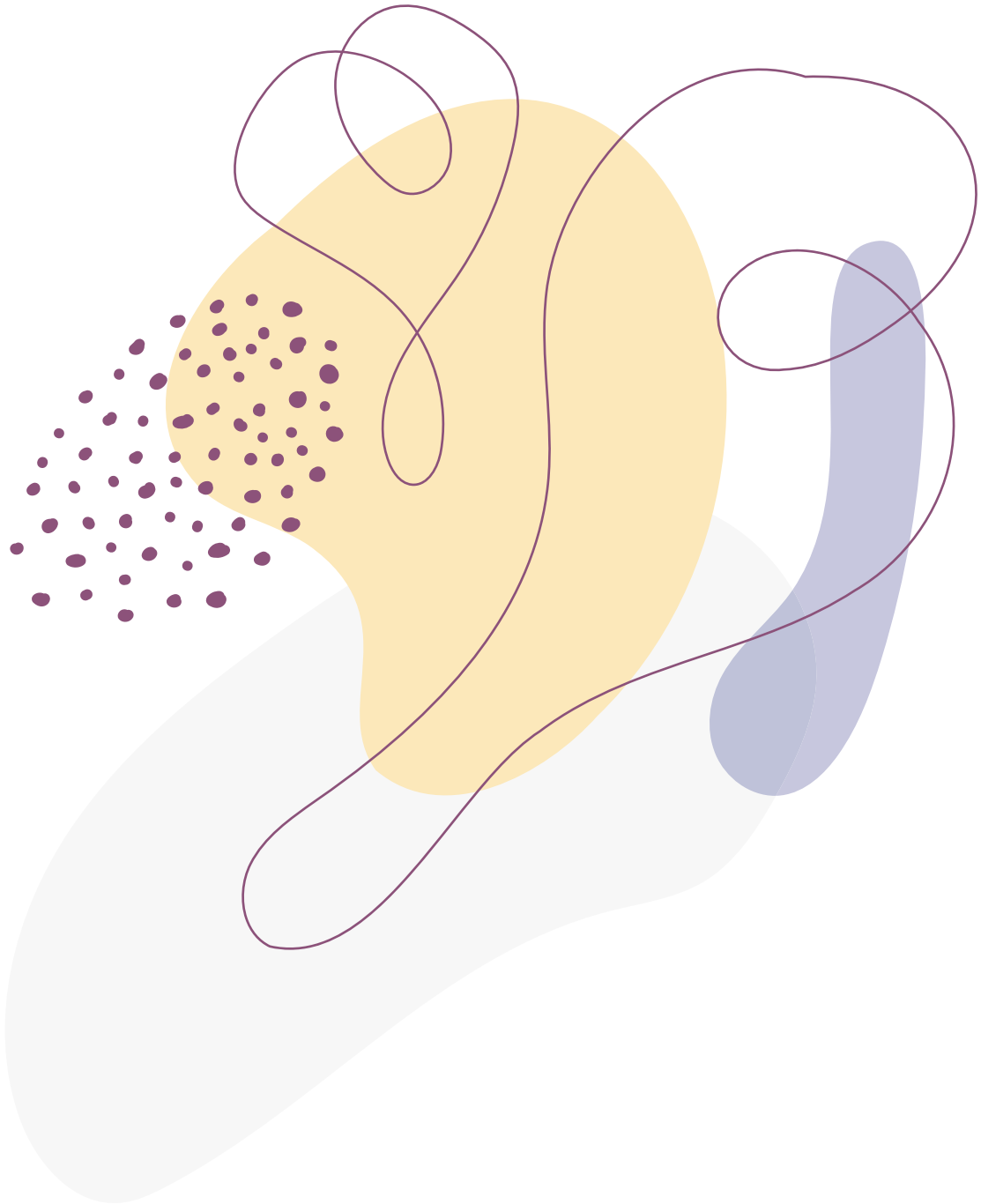
This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or ‘mother nature’, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty.

This brief glimpse at our liturgy, a key passage of scripture and the Statement from the Heart reminds us that there is more in common here than we may think.

To paraphrase Amanda Gorman,

. . . being Australian is more than a pride we inherit,
it's the past we step into
and how we repair it.

The sermon on which this text is based was preached by the Revd. Canon Glenn Loughrey at St. Oswald's Anglican Church, Glen Iris, Victoria, 29th January 2023.



Beatitudes to the Heart

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

These verses from Matthew's Gospel, known as the Beatitudes, are just about the best known and most loved of all the bits of the Bible. They are probably among the most loved words from all literature. Why is that? What do people love about them?

Is it because it is nice to think that God will lift up all those unfortunate people who have been trodden down and overwhelmed by a cultural tide that is always going in the opposite direction? Do we love these words because they allow us to think, "It's OK that they are trodden down, because God will take care of them?" Is that why people love these words?

Or is it because, when we are trodden down, they remind us of a day when God will make sure that we come out on top? When we are losing, the Beatitudes assure us that one day we will win. Do we love these words because their future hope sustains us so well that we don't feel any need to fight for a better world now? Is that why people love the Beatitudes?

Those questions are worth asking but, I am captivated by them because they draw us into paradox. They strip away simplistic thinking by placing opposites together and telling us that it is the nature of God's Kingdom that those opposites are held together. I love that because I am sick of simplistic solutions. I know they don't work. So, I am open to letting a Kingdom paradox puzzle me and maybe even transform me.

We find paradox in every line of the Beatitudes. In various ways they say, "blessed are those who are never, ever blessed in the usual flow of life". Blessed are those left begging on the side of the road while the rest of us are heading toward somewhere beautiful in our comfortable cars. This paradox drives us to us rethink and redefine everything by causing us to ask "what does it mean to be blessed?"

We find even more paradox when we combine the different lines together. Right in the centre of the beatitudes we find:

6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

AND then

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Have you ever tried to do both those things at once? Just one is hard enough: to be so single-minded in your fight for justice that you forget about eating and drinking because justice is all you desire, because all you care about is making the world better for everyone. Imagine managing to live like that and then meeting someone who is practicing injustice, someone who is benefitting directly from other people's suffering. Would mercy be your first thought? Have you ever known anyone who is even capable of combining justice and mercy like that? Jesus. Maybe Gandhi. Maybe Dr Miriam Rose.

This is hard! But somehow it is also inspiring. We all want to be like that. That's why people love Jesus and Gandhi and Miriam. They show us what humans are capable of and enable us to believe maybe even we might be capable of it, too. Just a bit. These people have lived inspiring lives in the context of particular historical events and challenges, not some theoretical reality that made this stuff easy for them. We also live in a particular time and place. Today is the Sunday after January 26, the day many of us can no longer call Australia Day. A day when we wish we could celebrate, but we can't.

And so, since this is our context, let's look at these beatitudes in light of what we know of the experience of Australia's First Peoples, with as much clarity as we can, given that most of us have experienced life very differently.

3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

This is a bit of a puzzle. Luke's version just says, "Blessed are the poor" (Luke 6:20). That is still a confronting paradox, but at least we know what

it means. “Poor in spirit” is harder to grasp. But there is a clue! The phrase “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” is in both this first line and the last line, which makes for a nice package and also suggests that the last line might help us understand the first line.

11 Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

And that leads me to think about a people group who had developed spiritual beliefs and practices over tens of thousands of years: beliefs and practices that sustained their communities, embodied their histories, and reinforced their connection with the land. Then Europeans came along. And, on the whole, those Europeans imposed Christian beliefs and practices without first listening to the older spiritualities and considering together how the good news of Jesus might be heard as good news by them. Instead, they were often accused of and punished for worshipping demons if they held on to any of their spiritual traditions. That, it seems to me, is at least a part of what it means to be poor in spirit. To have your spiritual life ridiculed and dismissed. Jesus was also accused of demon possession on occasion. And Jesus says those who experience such accusations are blessed. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

There is so much mourning at the heart of Australia. There are those who mourn over the disruption of family life when children were stolen from their parents. There are those who mourn for sons and grandsons, daughters and granddaughters who are in prison, or who have died in custody. There is mourning over the loss of their language and culture and the destruction of sacred sites and there is mourning for people who have lived without hope and died too young.

Jesus says they are blessed. They will be comforted. Followers of Jesus need to consider how we might get involved in doing that work of comforting.

5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

This is a tough one because it is often read as “blessed are those who don’t make a fuss, because their reward can be deferred into the indefinite

future.” But since it is placed right next to “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” we know it can’t mean that. If you look up meek in a dictionary you find phrases like “unwilling to disagree or fight” and “easily imposed on”. One hundred and fifty years of frontier wars show us that many First Nations people were very willing to fight for their land, their people, their dignity and their way of life. And many fight still, through legal and political systems, for recognition and justice. I would not want to insult them by calling them meek in that sense. Yet, people can be “easily imposed upon”, not because they are passive in nature but because they have been denied agency or resources, or through generation after generation of trauma. People groups can become pawns in other people’s agendas and objects in other people’s social experiments. And Jesus says they are blessed. They are the ones who will inherit the earth. If we hope to inherit the earth with them in the future, what are we doing now to protect that inheritance?

6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled.

The people who most desire justice tend to be the people who have been most denied justice: people who have had everything taken away. People whose lives have been easier get sick of those hungry ones protesting and going on about justice all the time, but Jesus says they are blessed. They will receive the justice they hunger for. Will we make them wait for the justice of God, or will we choose right now to practice justice in our relationships with them? Will we offer ourselves as the instruments through whom God’s justice might be established?

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart is an incredibly generous invitation. While it acknowledges great injustice and suffering, it does not express a desire for revenge, just for a voice, a say, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is a statement full of mercy. Which Jesus says will be blessed. Mercy will be shown to them. If relationship with God is about the generous exchange of mercy, how could we refuse the invitation their mercy has extended to us?

8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

When I think of an Aboriginal grandmother single-mindedly working to keep her grandchildren safe from the whole minefield of dangers that Aboriginal children face—that, for me, is as good an image of purity of heart as I can imagine. I'm not saying that she is perfect, just that circumstances have narrowed her vision down to one righteous purpose. And Jesus says she is blessed. Her vision has been so clarified that her eyes are able to see God, like Hagar did in the wilderness (Gen 16:13). Should we place our own perspectives and prejudices between her and God, or will we long for the privilege of learning from her about the God she might see much more clearly than we can?

9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Makarrata is a process for establishing peace after a conflict. Peace doesn't just happen at the end of a war. Peace must be worked for. Peace must be made. Australia, as a nation, did not do that peacemaking work after the Frontier Wars. There is so much work still to do. Those who do that work are doing God's work, the work of establishing peace. And Jesus says they will be blessed. Their likeness to God will be acknowledged.

And that brings us back to:

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

People who have no kingdom in this world, who have fought for justice and right relationships and been ignored and maligned, the kingdom of Heaven belongs to them. Jesus says they are blessed.

What do we do with all this? If we choose to walk into the world of paradox that the Beatitudes open up for us, and let ourselves be turned upside down, what happens next? What happens to us as the Beatitudes do their work on us?

Well, for a start, they give us a moral compass. They remind us that there is such a thing as true north, even when our world seems to be spinning on a completely different axis. That steadies us and gives us hope. But hope in the future is not really hope unless it changes us in the present. If we hope for a better world in the future, for the coming of the kingdom of God, then we will work to make our current world more like that better world we hope for.

And so, as we look back to January 26, and look ahead to a referendum year. What will we, mostly white people as we are in this congregation, do to help bring about that paradoxical, upside-down reality for the First Peoples of Australia?

Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is theirs”. What about the land their people have lived on for tens of thousands of years?

Jesus said, “They will be comforted”. How might we offer them comfort by doing everything we can to ensure their voices are heard and their histories, languages and cultures acknowledged?

Jesus said, “They will be given the justice they are starving for”. How might we be God’s instruments in creating a more just Australia?

Jesus said, “They will receive mercy from God”. In what way will we offer them our mercy?

Jesus said, “They will see God”. Will we ask them if they are willing to share with us what they know of God so we can learn to see God more clearly through their eyes?

Jesus said, “They will be called children of God”. If we hope to be God’s children along with them, are we practicing the basic habits of respect we teach our children: sharing, saying “sorry”, saying “thank you”, and saying “please”?

Jesus said again “The kingdom of heaven is theirs”. What place might they have in the commonwealth of Australia? Will we test what true blessing looks like by committing ourselves to being a blessing to everyone who is poor, grieving, easily put upon, desperate for justice, traumatised or falsely accused, and so learn to walk upright in an upside-down world? As you do that, the Lord be with you.

The sermon on which this text is based was preached by the Rev Dr Margaret Wesley at St. Paul’s Anglican Church, Ashgrove, Queensland, 29th January 2023.

Salt and Light and The Voice

Texts: Matthew 5:13-20, Isaiah 58:1-9a, Voice (Poem GWL)

Last week we explored the place of Voice in our liturgy and the relationship between the Statement from the Heart, which we read, and the Beatitudes, the seminal section of the Sermon on the plain.

This week we have Jesus drawing out for us the challenge that sits within the Beatitudes. He uses a simple analogy, salt and light. If salt loses its flavour, it cannot season food in the way it should.

William Loader suggests:

God is light. Jesus is light. And, says Matthew's Jesus, so are you! But not as an elite, as a group of privileged people, be it Israel or Christians, who once, perhaps, were good salt, but as people living the kind of life called for in the challenge of the beatitudes.

The salt and light analogy does not stand alone, it is connected directly to the challenge of the Beatitudes, the challenge for us to bless those who are not blessed as we are in our society, those we have left behind.

The salt and light analogy is often used to encourage a virtuous life. Over the years our communal world has shrunk to now be what is behind our garden gate and those directly connected to it. We look at others with a certain sense of well they could have what we have if they worked for it, behaved better, weren't wasteful etc.

Yet that is not the attitude of Jesus. He calls for us to include, right in the centre of life those we do not see as equals and bless them with the possibility of their Voice being heard. In Jesus time there were many who did charity work, helped the poor and the sick as there are today, but instead of life getting better Jesus is quoted elsewhere as saying that you will have the poor with you always. Why? Because you are not changing the system sustaining the powerlessness of others you seek to help. Isaiah states you do all these religious things but nothing changes. The oppression continues despite all your religious fervour. He then suggests an alternative.

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

In the Statement from the Heart the Voice is how we change what has remained the same from the beginning for First peoples, our destitution and our remaining in that deficit state. While there have been advisory and reference groups who have spoken to governments none of them have had the capacity to hold governments to account. Repeatedly governments have played politics with the situation Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people find themselves in. Our representative bodies are disbanded when they become troublesome.

We are people not issues We are the first people of this place who have not ceded sovereignty or given up our rights to what was and is ours. How does the Voice address these issues? It does so through the inclusion of sovereignty via recognition and Voice in the Constitution, our foundational document.

Sovereignty is a Gospel imperative. Our second reading reminds that Jesus is the sovereignty of God interacting with the sovereignty of his mother's country. Within Jesus there is found two sovereignties existing in harmony. First, there is God's sovereignty which is primordial in the sense it comes with Jesus from his Father's country and has jurisdiction over the whole of creation and his mother's sovereignty which pertains only to his own country, the space and tradition in which he is born and lives. He is both God and man, divine and human.

In the gospel reading Jesus affirms this relationship:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the

least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

- **Sovereignty is a spiritual notion.** This is the case for First Peoples as laid out in the Statement from the Heart and as lived in the incarnated Christ. While shared sovereignty may seem to raise legal issues, it is not a legal matter. It is the spiritual interaction of the deep and powerful meanings of both sovereignties as shared for the wellbeing of all in our nation. It is a recognition that both are needed for a mature and whole nation. The legalities are for parliament to decide. The referendum question is a moral, ethical, and spiritual question.
- **Sovereignty retained.** Voice allows both parties to retain sovereignty. The Commonwealth does not give up sovereignty, nor does the First Peoples. The right to be heard on matters pertaining to First Peoples is the maintenance of our traditional sovereignty which has always been internal – the regulation of things directly connected to the source of our sovereignty – country. The Commonwealth retains its sovereignty that allows it to govern the whole. This process strengthens both and enhances our democracy.
- **Sovereignty embedded.** Recognition in the constitution locks this co-sovereignty relationship away as a permanent reminder of the diversity of our land and the accommodation made to include. It recognises our history and begins the process of real reconciliation because it cannot be changed according to a political whim. Governments will have to engage in meaningful ways and not just because it is politically expedient to.
- **Permanent right to speak on matters that affect us.** Western sovereignty is an imposed act – it pertains not just to what we need to address within borders but what is outside our borders. It is both a moving out and a moving in. Indigenous sovereignty is internal – what is necessary to retain relationship with the spiritual centre of our

existence- our country. It is not about what others outside do. Voice is about speaking on behalf of and for country.

- **Power of the people to ensure parliament listens.** This is where we as the people who bless come in. Our affirmation of the proposition to embed our people in the Constitution and give a Voice to Parliament means that Governments will be challenged to listen. If they do not, we who have blessed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a yes vote can demonstrate our disappointment at governments if they do not listen at the ballot box. Together we hold the power. Together we can be blessed.

Jesus applies the analogy of salt and light to the act of blessing others and allowing them to be blessed as we are. Isaiah, continuing the tradition of the Prophets reminds us that the only piety of value is that of justice and responsibility for the other. The Voice is an opportunity to embrace our calling to be salt and light and as Isaiah reminds us in Isaiah 58 says:

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear-guard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

The sermon on which this text is based was preached by the Revd. Canon Associate Professor (ANU) Glenn Loughrey at St. Oswald's Anglican Church, Glen Iris, Victoria, 5th February 2023.

The mystery of forgiveness opens the path to restorative justice: being freed to repent of complicity in the colonial sin.

Text: John 20: 19-31

When Prime Minister Bob Hawke attended a Northern Territory Indigenous festival in 1988 he promised a historic treaty with the Aboriginal people. The Barunga statement was a declaration written on bark by Yolngu, Arrernte, and Warlpiri men and presented by the Northern Territory's Northern and Central Land Councils containing their demands and aspirations for a treaty with the Australian government. Hawke co-signed the statement with the Aboriginal representatives and set a deadline for a treaty by the end of 1990. He promised the treaty would be negotiated before the end of his term.¹⁰ Hawke's broken promise speaks to the structural nature of First Nations' people's powerlessness in this land we call Australia.

The Statement from the Heart states the structural nature of the powerlessness engulfing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may be seen in the incarceration rates of Indigenous people and the alienation of their children. The Statement describes this powerlessness as a torment. John's gospel also has a story of Jesus being tormented as he faces the threat of being stoned to death by his enemies, while his friend Lazarus has died (John 11:8). This is the context in which John introduces readers to Thomas for the first time. This context is critical to understanding what John's good news is for Thomas in John's resurrection account. We may better hear John's good news if we also understand what Thomas has in common with Bob Hawke.

What Hawke and Thomas have in common is that they "talked big". The only thing John tells us about Thomas is that when Jesus faced the threat of death in chapter eleven, full of bravado, Thomas says to his fellow disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him' (11:16). Hawke and Thomas made big promises in front of their peers, even when they knew there was political opposition to their public statements. Prime Minister Hawke knew there was opposition to his promise of a treaty with Indigenous people. Vocal opponents included strident statements from politicians in the Liberal party, as well as fierce resistance within his own party from the

West Australian Burke Labor government and the mining lobby. Thomas was also aware of the threat of political opposition; he knew that the Jewish leadership wanted to kill Jesus because Jesus was a threat to their political collusion with the Roman Empire.

John only mentions Thomas once more, when he places Thomas at the centre of his resurrection story. Thomas re-enters John's gospel as one of Jesus' disciples who betrayed Jesus by putting his personal survival first when Jesus was faced with the violence of Roman crucifixion. What Thomas also has in common with Hawke is their betrayal of a promise. Bob Hawke's broken promises to Indigenous Australians is viewed as a betrayal by many Indigenous people today.

The Statement from the Heart implies we non-Indigenous Australians are complicit in the original sin of betrayal by perpetuating the theft of First Nations land that was never ceded to the British Crown. Our Synod has a project called Money for Mission, selling church property on land that for 60,000 years prior was First Peoples Country. Funds raised from these sales goes almost entirely to help the Uniting Church survive its current crisis of declining membership and income.¹¹ This is our church's latest act of complicity in the original sin of the theft of colonial land and the consequent devastation of Indigenous culture, kinship, and spirituality. The Statement from the Heart reminds us that the structural torment of First People's powerlessness is embedded in the structural nature of Australian Christianity's power and privilege. As a Christian minister to hear this truth evokes my guilt and shame. Yet John's Thomas story speaks to my guilt and shame in the mystery of resurrection grace.

The disciples do everything they can to hide their guilt and shame at betraying Jesus. Their fear of being found out as friends of Jesus by his Jewish opponents causes the disciples to huddle together behind locked doors (20:19). Yet Jesus appears in their midst, and calms their terror, saying: 'Peace be with you' (20:20). Then Jesus showed them the wounds caused by his crucifixion. The disciples rejoiced because it was clearly the crucified Jesus who was reaching out to them, repeating his greeting, 'Peace be with you' (20:21).

So here is the heart of John's gospel that western minds, formed in the belief that truth is something that has to be objectively measurable, have

failed to grasp. The resurrection miracle is that the unforgivable may be forgiven. The source of the disciples' joy is that in receiving the promise of Jesus' forgiveness of their dismal failure to support him when he was being persecuted, they are freed to repent of their shameful failure and gladly recommit themselves to serving his newly inaugurated counter-community of justice. John's focus is not on what the disciples see -- Jesus' healed wounds -- it is on what Jesus says and does:

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (20:22-23).

This is the Easter miracle: Jesus, having fully and completely offered his forgiveness to his betrayers with the blessing of peace, then gives the power of forgiveness to all who genuinely repent of their sin and take up the promise of renewed life. Until that moment in history, Jewish belief was that only God could forgive sins. So Jesus' forgiveness reveals to all his followers he is at one with God. Then Jesus declares that this power to forgive sins is now given to the disciples, to human beings. Not only are the unforgivable actions of the disciples forgiven, from that moment on they are given the power to forgive, a power which had until that moment been limited to God's providence.

In the Statement from the Heart First Nations people wounded by 250 years of colonial injustice express their desire to live together with we settler non-Indigenous Australians in future coexistence. This is a gracious act that may signal a powerful first step in a process of restorative justice between First Nations and Settler people. We who are settler peoples have been invited into a new relationship with First Nation's people despite our ongoing complicity in the historic sin of the colonial theft of Indigenous Country and our continued participation in the betrayal of God's justice by the British Crown. But will our ongoing complicity with this historic injustice prove forgivable? First, we need to open our hearts to receive the Statement's gift of love by turning away from (that is repent of our complicity in) the structures of colonial sin. We Australian Christians are called by John's gospel to see the movement of God's Spirit in the Statement from the Heart. As Christ's gift of God's love to his betrayers was the first step in transforming their relationship, so the Statement calls the

Australian people to a first step by saying 'yes' to the referendum proposal to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of Australia in the Constitution through an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice, and thereby begin the pilgrimage of truth-telling, confession, repentance, and amendment of relationships.

My heart sings to see God's gift of love being offered to settler Australians after our betrayals and hard-heartedness. For more than 60,000 years, the Ancestral Spirits of First Nations people have formed them to live in peace with one another and with Country. In this referendum year, they are reaching out to we recent arrivals on their Country with a generous invitation to walk with them into a new future for our nation, blessed by the sovereign peace of their Ancestral Spirits and so I believe, with the sovereign justice of the Holy Spirit.

With all that said, why does John reintroduce Thomas at this late stage of his narrative? We have heard how John's resurrection narrative first speaks to the liberating power of God's forgiveness for all those burdened by the sin of guilt and shame. Now it turns to the presence of Thomas to remind us that God's forgiveness is also intensely personal. If the political transformation wrought by the forgiveness of God's Spirit does not bring personal transformation, it cannot be sustained. To refuse the gift of this forgiveness is to continue living in the sin of betrayal. When Thomas catches up with the disciples who have experienced Christ's forgiveness, he doesn't believe their story. For Thomas, his betrayal of Jesus was unforgivable. Thomas dismissed their account as a self-serving illusion: Thomas believed his brutal betrayal was unforgivable.

But then Jesus appears to Thomas and speaks the same word of forgiveness, 'Peace be with you.' Then it is Jesus' invitation to Thomas to touch the wounds, to place his hand on Jesus' healed wounds that touches Thomas's heart through the power of God's love. John doesn't report that Thomas touched Jesus as invited, even though those blinded by science remember this story as if Thomas did touch Jesus. Rather, John's account moves straight to how Thomas was touched by the sheer intimacy of the grace offered to him by the resurrected Christ. Thomas is in awe and wonder at the power of such overwhelming love to promise the renewal of his relationship with the one he had betrayed. Thomas responds to Christ's gift of love by turning away from his past sin so he too may be in solidarity with

Christ's new community committed to God's justice and righteousness. He exclaims 'My Lord and my God' (20:28).

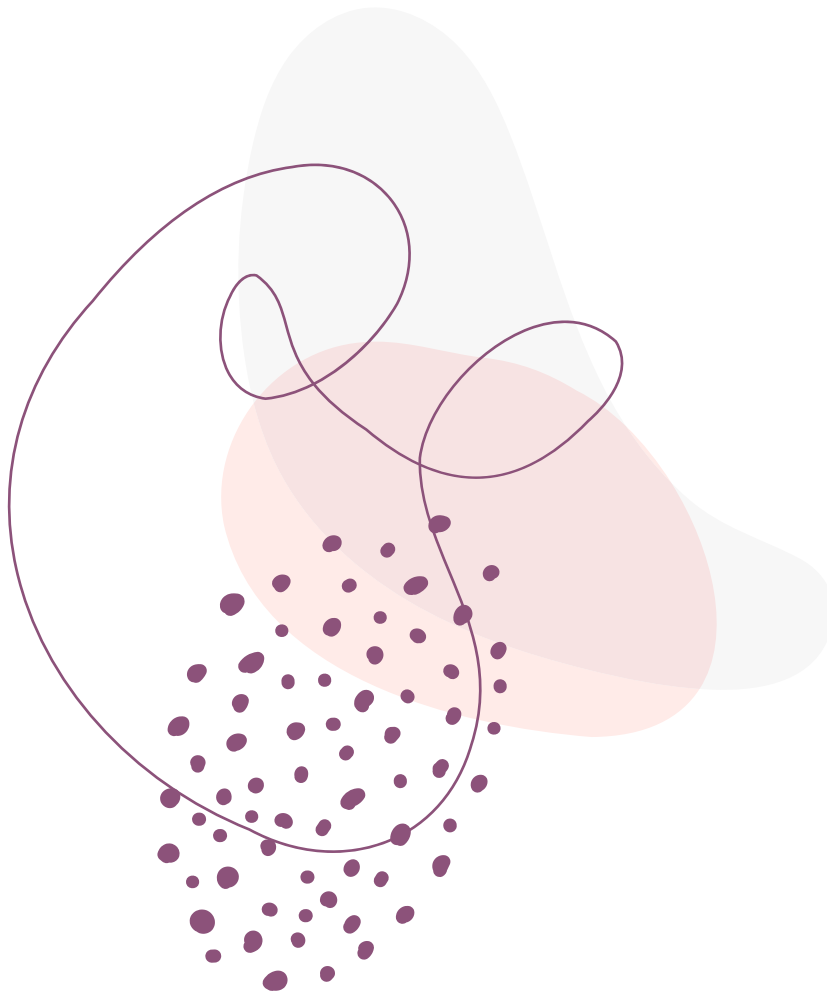
In the context of the brutality and violence of the Roman colonial powers that crucified Jesus, Thomas is saying, Jesus is my Lord, not Caesar. Jesus is the one who is Thomas's God, not the colonising Roman Emperor. Here is where truth-telling by the betrayer begins. Thomas is committing himself personally and fully to the transforming work of Christ's sovereignty by turning away from (repenting) the violent, death-dealing colonial powers of the Roman Empire.

We may understand this transforming grace through the testimony of another Thomas, Torres Strait Islander Thomas Mayo. Thomas Mayo was visiting schools to speak about the Statement from the Heart. Recently, a teacher friend had arranged for him to teach an entire high school about the Statement from the Heart. Thomas Mayo said, 'The first assembly complete, as I waited in the lunch break for the next to start, this fifteen-year-old boy hung around, tentative, as other ... students asked me their questions. Finally, ... the shyer boy came to me. He said, "That was really interesting, what you had to say." He looked at his hands and paused. Then he reached into his heart, and with his words he gave me a gift I will always treasure. He said with certainty, an unwavering resolve: "Some of the people in my family say racist things. I just wanted to tell you that I won't do the same. I am going to be different." Thomas Mayo concluded: 'Children see the world as it should be. We should be generous to our children, and make it so.'

Thomas the disciple also came to see the world differently through the grace of God's promise given to him in Christ. We are each called personally to see our lives differently through the Statement from the Heart. For me, the burden of shame at my inherited privilege is being lifted by the invitation of First Nation's people to all Australians to live together in co-existence. I hear First Nation's invitation as I gaze at the wounds borne by their people laid bare in the Statement from the Heart. Their generous gift of love touches my heart. I rejoice with Thomas that the deathly burden of colonialism has been shown for what it is in Christ's crucifixion and defeated by the power of God's forgiving grace, a grace now gifted to the hearts of all who believe. From that first Easter, saying 'yes' to life in Christ is a new possibility for our country. We who are settlers may see a new path

founded in our repentance and confession that engages us in truth-telling and treaty, freed from the burden of the violent sin and evil of colonialism. I am called to say 'yes' to life in Christ by saying with Thomas: 'My Lord and my God'. May your 'yes' at the national referendum for an Indigenous Voice to parliament be a joyous 'yes' to the invitation to walk with Aboriginal and Torres Strait people 'in a movement of the Australian people for a better future'.

*The sermon on which this text is based was preached by
Rev. John Bottomley at Heathmont Uniting Church, Heathmont, Victoria,
16th April 2023.*



What's in it for us?

Texts: Acts 17. 22-31; 1 Peter 3.8-22; John 14. 15-21

Have you ever noticed the place of Aboriginal people in Australian novels (not just the recent Indigenous writers, but older novels like Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot* or Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*)? There is almost always a shadowy Aboriginal figure somewhere, always just on the edge of the action, outside the ring of the campfire, observing, listening, waiting to be invited in.

Today's first reading is the account of Paul's speech on the Areopagus in Athens. He has already spent some time in conversation with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, in which they ask, disparagingly, 'what does this babbling have to say?' (Acts 17.18), or as we might put it, 'what's in it for us?' Paul begins the major speech with a reference to the piety of his hearers: 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are'. He ends it—and it's significant that this comes only at the end, after all this conversation—by announcing the good news of resurrection life. The conversation itself is significant, because as Orthodox theologian Bogdan Lubardic has argued, Paul demonstrates a familiarity with the main schools of Greek philosophy in his own day and even some of the Greek playwrights (the reference to 'some of your poets' is not just a throwaway line, but a quite specific reference). Lubardic claims, in addition, that Paul is depicted here as something of a Socratic figure, a type his hearers will recognise, as both a truth-bearer and a potentially tragic figure—because the truth he speaks will be heard as provocative. And like Socrates, Paul has spent time listening. Now he asks to be heard. That's the nature of dialogue.

We make a mistake if we, as Christians, identify in this story simply with Paul—with the one carrying the truth and maybe suffering for it. We might also consider putting ourselves in the place of those very religious; and talkative; Athenians, to whom a messenger of the Christian God has been sent. And when I say 'we', I speak as a non-Indigenous Australian, to a group of (I'm assuming) other non-Indigenous Australians. If anyone here does happen to be of Aboriginal descent, then please bear with me for the next few minutes while I try to reflect on this business of talking and listening from my non-Indigenous perspective.

We've done a lot of talking, people like me, over the past 230 years in this country, about what might be good for the Indigenous people whose lands we've occupied and whose cultures we've suffocated and whose children we've stolen. We've talked and we've been listened to, patiently and carefully by our Indigenous neighbours.

Paul in today's first reading, like the Aboriginal figure in our Australian literature, is an outsider, but he's listened to the chattering of the philosophers and playwrights, and has waited patiently for his turn to speak, waited to be noticed and listened to. The risk is that, like the Athenians in this parallel universe, we non-Indigenous Australians might dismiss as a mere babbling this silent Aboriginal observer, if he or she finally dares to speak. 'What has this babbling to say to us? What's in it for us?

'What's in it for us' then becomes a way a way of dismissing an opinion. But we can also take it as a serious question: What would be in it for us if we were to stop talking and start listening to our Indigenous neighbours?

This is the question put to us by the request, the exceedingly polite request in the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart, for a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution It's the request we're Now being asked to consider in the forthcoming referendum.

I can think of three arguments against the Voice, two of which I think we can dismiss fairly quickly; the third is perhaps more serious. The first is that the proposal might be too general. To that I'd say, this request is for constitutional change, and the constitution is a matter of principles; the practicalities of implementing them will change over time. The second argument against is the claim that we should be going for something more ambitious: a treaty. To that I'd say, there needs to be a body to negotiate with, for a treaty, and also, the Voice is what's on offer at present. Let's not miss this opportunity. The third possible objection is that it seems to set up a division in society based on an accident of birth, namely whether one has Aboriginal heritage or not; a new sort of bonyip aristocracy. This is the one that worried me for a while, until I realised the obvious—that aristocracies (bonyip or otherwise) are created by those who talk loudest and back up their voices with force. Here we're talking about allowing the voices to be heard of those who have, in the places of their own sovereignty and after generations of silencing, been pushed to the margins, and been made the

outsiders. It is a quite remarkable feature of the novels I mentioned at the outset that an Aboriginal figure should appear only as an outsider, in his or her own country.

In response to these arguments there are at least three reasons, in my opinion, why we as a nation should be listening to this request, and setting up the ongoing institutional means for a First Nations Voice to the nation: a practical reason, a psychological reason, and a theological reason.

The theological reason has to do with valuing the land, and the people of the land. The people of the land (the *am ha'aretz*, as they're called in Hebrew) have a place in the economy of salvation, if we read the Bible carefully. We also know that Indigenous people value their connections to their ancient lands, skies and waters—in ways that we non-Indigenous people can barely comprehend. It's not surprising we can barely comprehend it. After all, we're the descendants of people who left their homelands behind, cast themselves adrift, sometimes through necessity, but just as often through choice. Indigenous people, until the great disruption of the past 230 years, lived on country since creation. Indigenous theologians have been telling us in recent years about the significance of this deep and ancient connection to country, and one of the things they are saying to us is that the stories of country correspond to our Old Testament, that ancestor stories and the sacred places are their preparation for the gospel, in the way the Old Testament stories do for us. Of course it's going to be something of deep significance for Aboriginal Christians, in addition to any older, inherent significance country might hold. God's ancient people in this land are the Indigenous people.

This in turn leads to the psychological reason for us to start listening. The damage we have done, as a nation, has built up a store of guilt for our children and grandchildren. How can a young person today in non-Indigenous Australia, knowing our murderous history, be proud to be Australian? This is a problem for our whole sense of national identity.

Bernhard Schlink has written eloquently, from a contemporary German perspective, about the inheritance of guilt about the national past, and this is a real problem in Germany, as you might imagine. Schlink argues that this guilt persists as long as there remains personal acquaintance with one of the perpetrators. If I know my great-grandfather was a murderer, or a

child-abductor, and I have known my great-grandfather personally, I will continue to feel a guilt by association, a guilt visited on me, in other words, to the third and fourth generation. The emergence of truth about our national past imposes this guilt by association on our children. Listening, really listening, to the truth-telling of Indigenous people will be the necessary first step towards laying that sense of collective guilt to rest. This is the only way we non-Indigenous Australians will finally put a stop to the store of guilt we have accumulated over two centuries of colonisation.

Then there's the practical advantage of listening to the wisdom of Indigenous elders. It is that we might finally start to learn how to live in this country, this country that we've messed up so badly by our farming and mining and city-building practices. Think of all the things we have failed to learn about living here, through assuming we know better. A good example of what we need to learn is whole business of cool burning, something described by Victor Steffensen in his book *Fire Country*. Cool burns, he says, can only be done by people actually living on the land and observing it closely: what plants are in flower and which are not; how much has grown since last year; and how long ago did rain fall on this particular patch of grass, maybe the size of a football ground, but no larger. What are the animals and birds doing, last week and this week, in this place. This is not something that can be done by edict from some central authority, a state government or even a local council. It is very specific and very attentive to the state of country. And very different from the ways settler culture in Australia has applied itself to land use and the management of, in this case, bushfires. It's not about controlling or extinguishing fire when it happens but preventing it; and the prevention is the result of working with fire. We non-Indigenous Australians need to heed these people, and their traditional wisdoms. And not just about bushfires; there's also the whole business of building on flood plains, if we want another example.

Some years ago I went for a walk through the bush with a group of students, led by a Wurundjeri elder who took us to the 'birthing tree,' where his own mother had been born. There's an energy in trees like this, he told us, but you have to be calm and wait patiently to feel it. The sacred has to be given time and space to make itself known. So we waited. And listened. This is now what Indigenous Australians are asking the rest of us to do, as a nation: to be calm, and listen.

Paul, who spoke to the Athenians on the Areopagus, came to them as a truth-teller who had done his listening. He came with an understanding of the people he was about to speak to, how they thought and how they saw the world. Indigenous people in this country have also learnt our language and culture—we've given them no other option—but now after more than two centuries they're asking for their own story, and their own truth, to be heard, by us. If we were to deny them, it would be at our cost, and ultimately, to our shame. For it may be their voices hold the life-giving message of God.

*The sermon on which this text is based was preached by
Revd. Dr. Duncan Reid at St Stephen's Anglican Church, Richmond,
Victoria, 14th May, 2023.*



Remembering to become ourselves

Text: John 14.14-27

Faith and politics, yesterday and today

A widely-held truism within Australian society is that religion has no place in politics. This assertion seeks to exclude the political activity of those faith convictions, notably Christian and Muslim, which might make some claim on society as a whole. This rejection of faith convictions in the public sphere looks like the assertion of the public-private distinction which colours our thinking around religion. Our shared idea that politics is public and belief is private is part of the prohibition. But alongside this distinction between public and private realms is our sense of the distance between the present and the past. Faiths like Judaism, Christianity and Islam have deep historical roots. Indeed, they are rooted so far in the past that the question of their continuing relevance is greatly heightened. Are we today not 'modern'? Are we not people of the present rather than stuck in the past? And so there is no small sense in which the purported irrelevance of faith for modern politics is linked to the historical distance of faith's founding events from the present. The further back in time those foundational events are, the less relevant they seem to be for those today who have forgotten them. The historical distance of the crucifixion and resurrection seems to signify Jesus' modern irrelevance. The past is a privateprivity, hiddenthing, not for present, public exposure.

Put differently, the ejection of faith from politics presumes a politics which does not remember.

Forgetting and remembering

Our gospel text addresses the question of the impending departure of Jesus and this as a crisis for the disciples. It's not immediately clear from the text how the crisis is experienced. Clearly, the disciples' lives have been tightly bound up with Jesus, and his looming departure would create the typical emotional experience of loss and grief.

Yet Jesus speaks not of coping with grief but of 'reminding': 'Though I go', Jesus says, 'the Spirit, which the Father will send, will remind you of me'. This answer to the disciples' worry indicates that what's at stake here is not

the grief around Jesus' departure but the possibility that everything will be forgotten: first Jesus and then the disciples themselves. It is worth noting at this point that Jesus has just identified himself as 'the Way, the Truth and the Life' (14.6). Evocatively, the word for 'truth' has the curiously negative sense of 'not-forgotten': Jesus is 'the Way, the Not-Forgotten, the Life'.

The promised gift of the Spirit, then, is no mere 'There, there, it'll all be OK'. The Spirit is given because forgetting is bad. Remembering matters for true human being, for the continued presence of the humanity of Jesus. It is this remembering which creates the church.

And yet, the point here is not that the church only is a remembering community. This would be to leave us with the modern problem that the church seems – even to itself – to be a people trapped in thoughts about yesterday, and so politically irrelevant. The gift of the Spirit at the departure of Jesus makes the claim that individuals and communities in general must remember in order to become their true selves. This centrality of memory to identity is the engine of countless 'amnesia' plots in films and TV thrillers, with their driving 'Who am I?' question reverberating in the head of the protagonist. Remembering creates our present identity by telling us what we have done and what has been done to us.

Perhaps this is not overly controversial. Yet, even when we remember, we are prone to want to remember only the best and none of the worst. In contrast to this, remembering Jesus involves recalling not only the good stuff but the bad, not only the resurrection but the cross, not only what Jesus said that we liked but also when we suddenly found ourselves the target of his polemic. It is not for nothing that tokens of a broken body and spilt blood are at the centre of what the church does at Jesus' behest, 'for the remembrance of me'. These gory elements are there lest we forget that the light casts shadows.

So, too, with remembering in any community. Memory is usually pretty selective because it is painful to be reminded of things we have managed to forget.

A nation called to remember

Australian society is presently hearing a call to memory: Remember that the Australia we now know was founded as a colony. Remember that colonisation was often a violent process and, even where it wasn't,

recognise that it was and continues to be radically disruptive of whole peoples. Remember, Australia, and know how we have come to be what we think we are.

The 'Uluru Statement from the Heart' and the corresponding proposal for a First Nations Voice to Parliament are two forms the call to memory has taken among us. Without recognition of the importance of memory for identity, these can make no convincing social or political sense. And so, we must understand the place of memory, and the importance of institutions like the Voice which have precisely the purpose of reminding and bringing a fuller identity.

Remembering can be painful. If the promised Spirit reminds those first disciples and even us today of 'Jesus', it reminds not only of the words of peace on the lips of the risen one but also of the desolation of the cross. If the resurrection reveals something about the powers at play in the heart of God, the cross reveals something about the powers in the heart of humanity. Heaven is not the memory only of the good things. The church remembers the crucifixion and the synagogue remembers the exile, and both remember the divine judgement read into these experiences. But to forget such things would not simply be to cease being Christian or Jewish; it would be to cease to be human.

The remembering which could be enabled by the Uluru Statement's proposal of the Parliamentary Voice, with other history-telling processes, will similarly not be easy or comfortable. It will not be easy because we don't know what has been forgotten and so what might be recovered. It won't be comfortable because we cannot see the cost of remembering before we begin. It won't be simple because, sometimes, we will get the memory or the consequences we draw from it wrong. Memory can be wrong or deceived, but this makes it no less important. Errors should be named, but still we must seek to remember rightly, to know ourselves: to know our inherited way of being human.

We are what we have done and what has been done to us. These experiences are voices which speak to us and by which we speak, even if we don't remember them. To remember is to know why we are like we are, and so to see that we could have been different. To see that we might have been different is to realise that we could still be different. Memory like this makes change possible. And we could do with a few changes.

Jesus' promised gift of the Holy Spirit to his disciples is a promised gift of memory, and so a promise of change. What is remembered through this Spirit is the human experience of Jesus as a revelation of the rich possibilities of human life. To remember this is to see such richness as a possibility, even for forgetful people today. The call to memory in the Uluru Statement from the Heart is no less a gift: reconciliation requires truth, and truth is Not-Forgetting.

The Father draws all peoples to the one humanity of Christ through our remembrancing of him, and of ourselves. And so the humble spirit which calls us to memory through the Statement cannot but be the reminding and remaking Holy Creator Spirit of God, drawing us down a path which would bring the whole groaning world a little closer to God's coming reconciliation of all things.

We must heed the call in the Statement and commit to the Voice and similar institutions for remembering. This is how we become what God creates us to be.

*The sermon on which this text is based was preached by
Rev. Dr. Craig Thompson at Mark the Evangelist Uniting Church
North Melbourne, Victoria, 15th May, 2023.*

Ten Steps for the Christian from Uluru to Canberra

Texts: Maccabees 7:1-2,9-14; Psalm 16: 2; Thessalonians 2:16-3:5; Luke 20:27-38

In today's psalm, we pray:

Lord, hear a cause that is just,
pay heed to my cry.
Turn your ear to my prayer:
no deceit is on my lips.

And in the second reading, we hear Paul greeting the Thessalonians with these words: 'May our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father who has given us his love and, through his grace, such inexhaustible comfort and such sure hope, comfort you and strengthen you in everything good that you do or say'. We Christians who live in robust pluralist democracies like Australia accept that some of the good things we do and say are political, and that not everyone, even including our fellow Christians, necessarily agrees with our political standpoint.

During the first year of his pontificate, Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* said:

An authentic faith – which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it. We love this magnificent planet on which God has put us, and we love the human family which dwells here, with all its tragedies and struggles, its hopes and aspirations, its strengths and weaknesses. The earth is our common home and all of us are brothers and sisters. (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, #183)

Pope Francis then quoted with approval his predecessor Pope Benedict who wrote in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* that 'the just ordering of society and of the state is a central responsibility of politics', and that the Church 'cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice'.

(Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* #28.) Pope Francis added this observation: 'All Christians, their pastors included, are called to show concern for the building of a better world. This is essential, for the Church's social thought is primarily positive: it offers proposals, it works for change and in this sense it constantly points to the hope born of the loving heart of Jesus Christ.'

The recently completed Plenary Council of our Church endorsed the Uluru Statement from the Heart and encouraged 'engagement with processes for implementing the statement, including local, regional, and national truth-telling efforts.' (Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, Draft Decree One, Reconciliation: Healing Wounds, Receiving Gifts)

Prior to the 2007 election, John Howard promised an amendment to the Australian Constitution providing recognition of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in a preamble to the Constitution. In turn, the new Rudd Labor government committed itself to consultation on the matter with Indigenous Australians. Julia Gillard then set up an Expert Panel which recommended something more substantive than a symbolic preamble. The panel wanted a racial non-discrimination clause placed in the Constitution. Critics saw this as a one-line 'bill of rights'. There was no way this proposal could win support in the Parliament. After a round of community consultations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives gathered at Uluru for the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum and called for 'the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.'¹²

Liberal Prime Ministers Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison ruled out any such proposal. The Albanese government was elected with a commitment to proceed with a referendum. At the Garma Festival in July, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese proposed the following formula of words (see footnote for the 14 October referendum question):¹³

1. There shall be a body, to be called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.
2. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice may make representations to Parliament and the Executive Government on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.
3. The Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution, have power to

make laws with respect to the composition, functions, powers and procedures of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. (Anthony Albanese, Address to Garma Festival, 30 July 2022)

Noel Pearson in his first Boyer Lecture has said, 'We know the nation's leader must be joined by all his counterparties in the federal parliament'. (Noel Pearson, Boyer Lecture 1: Recognition) For any referendum to succeed, there is a need for a parliamentary process inviting all persons to put forward their proposed wording of any amendment. There will then be a need for buy-in and ownership of any proposal from both sides of the parliamentary aisle. That is now the task before us. Noel Pearson is confident that 'racism will diminish in this country when we succeed with recognition'. The challenge is to find a formula of words for that constitutional recognition acceptable both to Indigenous leaders and to our national leaders on both sides of the parliamentary chamber.

Presumably, this is a cause which is just. In pursuing it, there should be no deceit on our lips. The going will be tough. But we are assured inexhaustible comfort and sure hope in everything good that we do or say. Having said that, we need to concede that there will be people of goodwill, including some committed Christians who oppose whatever is ultimately proposed for insertion into our Constitution.

I suggest ten steps for Australian Christians inspired by our Catholic social teaching when approaching the forthcoming referendum. I couch the suggestions in terms appropriate for those of us who are not Indigenous.

1. Be attentive to the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Stop telling them what is good for them. Start listening to them. Accept that they know what is good for them, just as we know what is good for us and our loved ones.
2. Don't expect all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to agree about legal, political and constitutional questions. It's called living in a democracy.
3. Form respectful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and engage in respectful conversations with those who are your friends.

4. Having heard a range of Indigenous voices, make your own decisions about what Aboriginal aspirations are morally justified. What would be right and proper for Australia in the 21st century? For example, the Commonwealth Parliament has power to make special laws about us First Nations people. Many Aboriginal people now say, 'No special laws without us!'
5. Know your history; know the Aboriginal history. The Australian Constitution does not even mention Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders. They belong in the Constitution. Their belonging should be explicit and particular.
6. The Constitution belongs to all the people. It cannot be amended except with an overwhelming majority of the people. Educate yourselves about the Aboriginal aspirations at Uluru and be ready to discuss those aspirations at the family meal or the workplace BBQ.
7. Do something to get this issue of constitutional recognition on the right track. Speak to your local member. Ask that the parliament set up a process so everyone can have their say and so that the major political parties can own whatever is proposed. This is not just a matter for Indigenous leaders. It is not just a matter for the government. It involves all of us.
8. Having decided which Aboriginal aspirations are morally justified, you then need to make a wise decision about which of those aspirations are politically achievable. Don't be afraid to talk to people with varying views when making that decision.
9. Having decided which Aboriginal aspirations are morally justified and politically achievable, you then need to decide to act. You need to put some skin in the game. You need to decide what you will actually do about it. It's not enough just to vote when the referendum comes around. You need to get on board urging the parliament to put the right proposition to the vote, and helping your fellow citizens make an informed choice.
10. Be respectful and attentive to those who disagree with you, but don't be afraid to demand that they be respectful and attentive to you. We know that any national Voice worth its salt will have an elaborate system of local and regional ears to hear the local and regional voices which are

needed to give credibility to any national voice. That will be complex. There will be plenty of room for disagreement.

Whatever the politics of this referendum, let's take to heart Noel Pearson's chilling observation about his people: 'We are a much-unloved people. We are perhaps the ethnic group Australians feel least connected to. We are not popular, and we are not personally known to many Australians. Few have met us and a small minority count us as friends.'

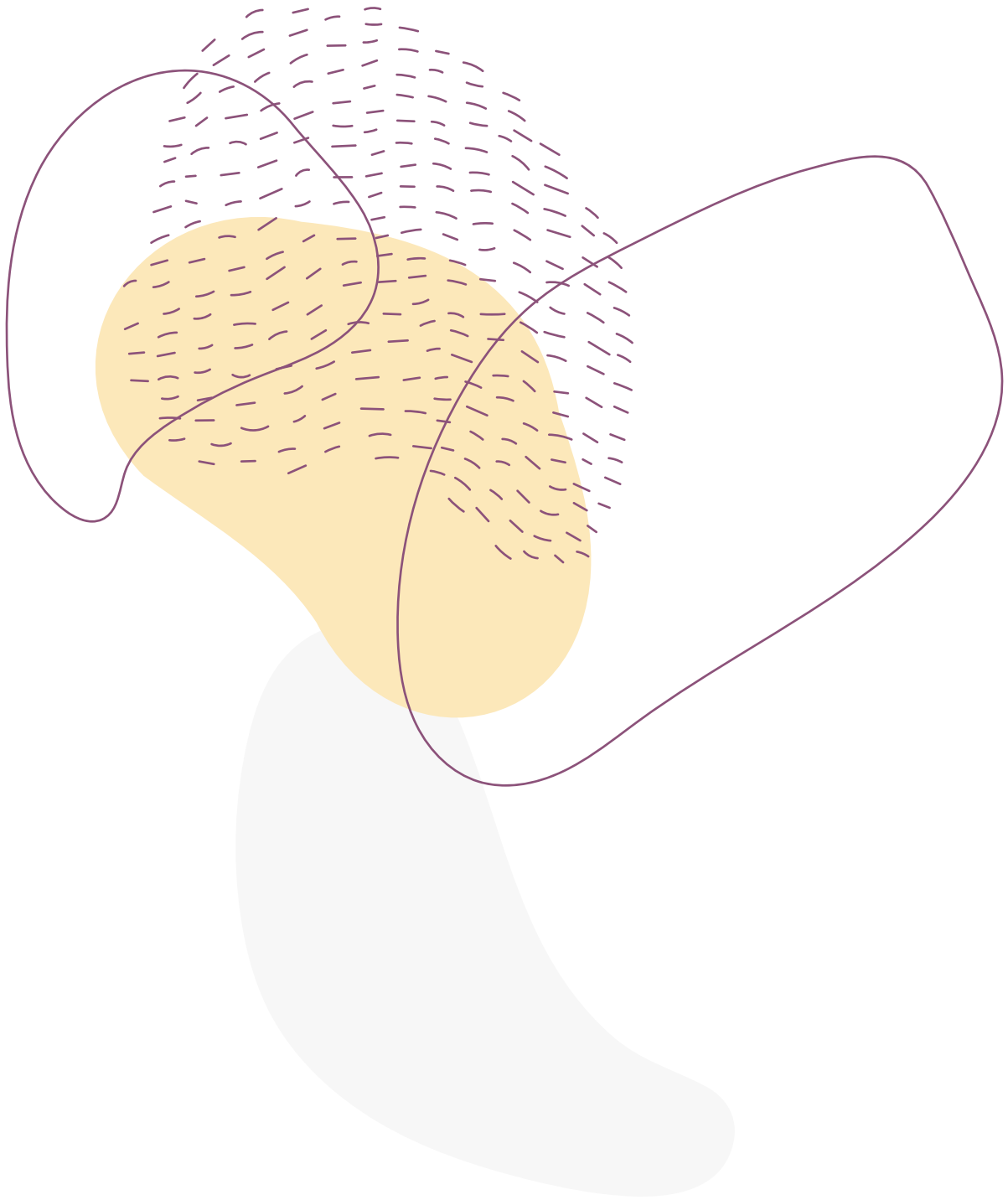
Let us pray:

*Lord, hear a cause that is just,
pay heed to my cry.
Turn your ear to my prayer:
no deceit is on my lips.*

*Guard me as the apple of your eye.
Hide me in the shadow of your wings.*

Lord Jesus Christ, comfort us and strengthen us in everything good that we do and say.

The text on which this homily is based for the 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C was preached by Fr Frank Brennan at Newman College, University of Melbourne, Victoria on 6th November 2022.



Listening to the language of costly love

Texts: Acts 2.1-21; Psalm 104.26-36; 1 Corinthians 12.1-13; John 20.19-23

Pentecost is generally narrated as the moment when all the believers in Jesus were gathered in one place and there was a sound like a rushing wind and tongues of fire could be seen landing on the heads of all gathered there. They began to speak in different tongues, inspired by the presence of the Spirit in them, and the Christian church was born.

This can become an incomplete retelling of the wonder that is the Spirit's coming at Pentecost. It can fit neatly into a linear history of the Church—Jesus' birth, death, resurrection, ascension and then finally the coming of the Spirit—but this unfortunately neglects both the Jewish heritage of the feast and the Spirit's presence since creation, brooding over the chaos, bringing order and breathing life. The linear model can also suggest a culmination rather than the rebirthing which sends us out, co-creators with the Spirit, inspired by visions and dreaming good dreams for a world of truth and justice.

Pentecost, 'the fiftieth day', was a festival marking seven weeks and one day after Passover which in Jewish tradition was known as the Festival of Weeks or Festival of Harvest, when first fruits were brought to the temple. After the destruction of the temple and by New Testament times, this thanksgiving feast was celebrated as the anniversary of the revelation of the Torah on Mount Sinai.¹⁴ The coming of the Holy Spirit should not be separated from the generativity of God in creation and the goodness of God's law and commandments.

The "birthday of the Church" narrative can miss the expansiveness of this story, but it also can tell a thin narrative about the good news we share. It is good news that Christ died for us and that we are forgiven people, empowered by the Spirit. However, this can never be separated from Jesus' words that he came not to abolish but to fulfil the law; law which can be summed up in the statement to love God and love your neighbour as yourself. The Spirit comes that we may be empowered to fulfil the law with the same costly love that God reveals in Jesus the Christ. All too often we encounter not the costly grace of Christ being revealed in the Church but the cheap grace which we bestow upon ourselves and which neglects the care of our neighbour.

And who is our neighbour? In this beginning of Reconciliation Week in Australia, the question should strike us as particularly relevant as we seek to listen to the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that there may be peace and mutual flourishing in this land. We should find it an important question when caring for our neighbour means leaning in to listen that we may better understand the experience of First Nations people. That Pentecost lands this year at the beginning of Reconciliation Week creates a powerful link with listening and language. When the Uluru Statement from the Heart describes the torment of powerlessness in the face of the suffering of their people in crisis, people of the Holy Spirit are called to pay attention to the structural and moral evils of colonisation. On the day the Spirit came, people were heard to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them voice, so that those from many different nations could hear and understand. With over 250 language groups amongst First Nations peoples, the Church needs the help of the Spirit today if we are to love our neighbour with the understanding born of deep listening.

Understanding was not in evidence this past week when someone used a power tool to carve the words, “Jesus saves just ask him” into a section of rock at the base of Mt Beerwah. The mountain is of great spiritual significance to the traditional owners, the Jinibara people. Uncle Kenny Murphy, a Jinibara elder, explained that the mountain was used for sacred ceremonies, and it was where Indigenous women gave birth. He also said, “The mountain is very important, it’s like our St John’s Cathedral.”¹⁵ While it is true that the deed would be as wrong regardless of the words, it made me acutely aware of the way Christianity loses its way when it becomes a simplistic message divorced from love of our neighbour with an arrogance that claims knowledge of God’s saving grace but without living out God’s costly love. To deface a sacred Aboriginal site with the words, “Jesus saves just ask him” is an ugly parody of the Christ who brings justice, peace and reconciliation, calling us to serve one another in humility and love.

What would it mean if the Spirit would bring to birth in us this day such love of our neighbour that we might be able to truly hear voices that in former days we could not or would not understand? Hearing to understand may help us to see the sacred in mountains as much as in cathedrals, to attend to the Word of God in creation as much as in scripture. Pentecost is a pouring out of the Spirit, but it was the same Spirit which had formed heavens and earth and through whose Word all life came to be. The same

Spirit who had been a presence among the Hebrew people as they fled slavery to freedom and received the law. Those gathered there that day were Jews who worshipped the one creator God whose prophets has called them to live in peace and justice. The Spirit was not born at Pentecost, even though we may mark the day as a beginning of the Church. Neither was the Spirit brought to this land along with the First Fleet cargo of convicts, soldiers and settlers. If listening to other languages and voices is a gift of the Spirit, how might our understanding of God be enriched as we attend to the spiritual knowledge and stories of other peoples and other nations? How might the Spirit enable us to hear the story of creation and humanity in the language of the First Peoples of this land; a voice which our colonising structures have silenced?

In reflecting on the role of scripture and the Church in preparing for this referendum year, Stan Grant has shared,

My people—Wiradjuri—have a word: Yindyamarra. It means to respect; to be gentle, to speak quietly and walk softly. It is a theology. It is captured in Micah 6:9: “And what does the Lord require of you but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”¹⁶

I find this a beautiful dialogue between Indigenous theology and the scriptures. More than that, Stan Grant’s words of grace, that he will come back from this time when he and his family have been the target of racial abuse to meet his abusers with “the love of his people”, is expressive of a profoundly moving and divinely inspired hope for our future.¹⁷ He adds to this by counselling to not mistake love for weakness. Such has been the hope of the Christian Church for ages past; that tyrants and oppressors may come and go, but ultimately the greatest power of the universe cannot be found in wealth, status or military power, but in love.

We are not there yet. The creation and all the peoples of the earth yet groan in longing for true reconciliation. In amongst all of our fears and anxieties Jesus comes, breathing peace. To the frightened disciples hiding in a locked room, Jesus came promising that through the Holy Spirit, ‘If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’ In understanding this astonishing statement, we are helped by the context of the risen Jesus showing them the wounds in his hands and

side. This moment of receiving the Spirit in John's Gospel is inextricably caught up with the suffering of Christ and his solidarity with the suffering of the world. If we are to follow the way of Jesus, we should be prepared for that way to be costly. Love offers no quick path to cheap forgiveness where there need be no reckoning with the past. If we refuse the call of the Spirit to walk the way of Christ in solidarity with our suffering brothers and sisters, then the sin of this country will remain. For sin to be forgiven, new life to flourish and true peace and reconciliation be known, then the Church needs to receive anew the Pentecostal Spirit which enables us to hear the voice of our Indigenous brothers and sisters and listen that we may understand. Maybe then, we can walk the costly road of repentance and witness to the world that love truly is the greatest power on earth.

The sermon on which this text is based was preached by the Revd Suzanne Grimmett at St Andrews Anglican Church, Indooroopilly, Brisbane, Queensland, 28th May 2023.

How Long, O Lord?

Texts: Psalm 13, Matthew 10.40–42

How long, O Lord, will you utterly forget me:
how long will you hide your face from me?

These are words from the Psalm we heard just moments ago. Words of lament and a cry of anguish that demand an answer,

How long? How long, O Lord?
How long until we have an answer?

I have a deep love of the Psalms, especially the gloomy, grumbly Psalms like the one we prayed today. These grumbly prayers are often called the Lament Psalms, and I love them. I love them because they give us a language for prayer when everything goes wrong. I love them because they are the human voice articulating the messiness of human existence. Crucially, I love them because they are deeply honest. Out of the one hundred and fifty Psalms in the Bible, over a third are various forms of complaint or lament, a collective human voice crying out to God for help, salvation, and a change of circumstances. The language is raw, honest and, at times, confronting. But it is always necessary.

Right now, in Australia, we are having a conversation which is also confronting, raw and very necessary. Right now, we are being asked to come together after a struggle and hear difficult, honest, words about our history and country. I am, of course, speaking of the public discussion of the Voice to Parliament and the referendum. I will be honest and open here and tell you that after prayerful consideration and after listening to the voices of First Nations peoples, I will be voting 'yes' in the referendum. It is not my place to tell you how to vote, yet I implore you to take some time to listen and pray over this issue. Over the past few years, I have been listening to the voices of First Nation sisters and brothers, and I cannot help but hear a parallel with the language of lament found in the Psalms, and I grieve when I hear an echo of our Psalm today as Elders ask the question.

How long?
How long will it take for justice, for reconciliation, for a voice?

So, let's ruminare on those words as we consider our very short gospel reading.

The gospel today is taken from the end of Jesus' teachings, given to his apostles before they are sent out into the world. The apostles are told that their mission will be difficult, and there is a real sense of danger. Jesus instructs the apostles to travel light and go only where they are welcomed. Jesus also warns them that they are being sent out like sheep in the midst of wolves, with the threat of persecution and arrest a danger of their ministry, a costly ministry to bring healing and wholeness to an oppressed people who, perhaps like the psalmist, lament as they ask:

How long?

How long must we suffer under Rome, how long O Lord?

After last week, our gospel might really feel like Good News. No more division and swords. Instead, today, we hear of hospitality. We hear in these words what it is to be Christlike in the world. But this needs unpacking. We are told both here and later in Matthew's gospel that to show loving kindness to those with the least power in society is to show that kindness to Jesus himself. While the church is the body of Christ in the world: his hands, his feet, and his voice, Christ is always going ahead of us and calling us to new opportunities and new places where we may encounter him. There is a sense of sacredness that transcends the everyday as we encounter Christ and are encountered as Christ.

And yet, even within this short passage, we still see the cost of discipleship, as Jesus says:

Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward.

If we are even a little familiar with the various prophets in the Hebrew Bible, well, we might question just what reward they are to expect. Prophets in scripture were not fortune tellers or people who predicted the future. Rather they stood up to authority, speaking words of truth to the powerful. They were sent by God to communicate judgment upon kings and queens

and the nobles of the land, and yes, even to the priests. Their lips spoke the words of God and upset the status quo, so perhaps it is unsurprising that the prophets were often less than popular. Their words are often bleak, perhaps even bordering on lament at times. Yet they hold to a deep honesty about the human condition, continuing to speak the truth even as those in power seek to imprison and kill them. And much like the psalmist, they cry out:

How long, O Lord, until justice rolls down like water
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream?

With this in mind, we may wonder who would welcome a prophet. Do we welcome modern-day prophets, ordinary women and men, whose words ring out when they arise from their quiet lives to shake the towers and counsels of the Great?¹⁸ Do we hear as their voices echo the psalmist, as they demand:

How long?
How much longer will we tolerate injustice?

As Christians, I believe we are called to hear the words of Jesus in our Gospel as our commissioning. At the end of our service here today, we will be sent in the name of Christ to “Love and serve the Lord”. It is at that doorstep that our true service starts; it is at that doorstep that the question of the psalmist demands an answer.

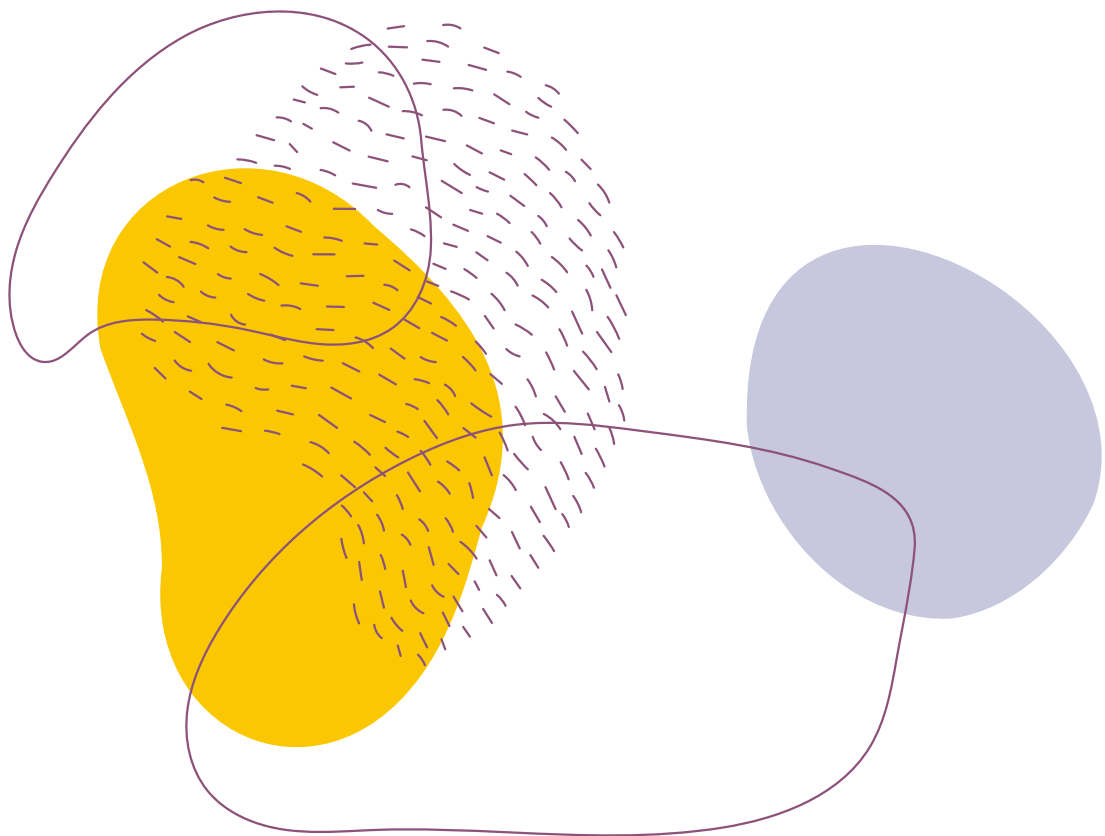
Today is the first day of NAIDOC week, an event that arose from an act of prophetic protest and a cry of mourning and lament¹⁹ as First Nations peoples stood up against years of violence, oppression and discrimination, crying out for official recognition and to be counted.²⁰ In the current debate surrounding the Voice to Parliament, this week is a time to hear from First Nations peoples and to celebrate their history, culture, and achievements. We might also ponder our response to the collective voice that cries,

How Long?

I hope that with our trust in the unfailing love of God, our response and our actions will be.

Now.

The sermon on which this text is based was preached by the Emily Bowser at St Hilda's Anglican Church, North Perth, W.A., 2nd June 2023.



Can I Even Speak? A Reflection on the First Sunday of NAIDOC Week, 2022.

Text: Luke 10.1-12, 17-20

Yamma.²¹ This is how my friend Geoffrey, a Gamillori man asked me to greet you as you listen to this NAIDOC week podcast. I greet you from the land of the Bidjigal People, on the northern shore of Kamay, or Botany Bay. I acknowledge the original custodians of these lands we now call Australia.²² I greet you on this first Sunday of NAIDOC Week 2022, when we recognise and celebrate the spirituality, history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.²³ Today is also the 14th Sunday of Ordinary Time, and our Gospel Reading comes from the 10th Chapter of the Gospel of Luke, verses 1-12 and 17-20.

On 29 April 1770, the Endeavour sailed into Kamay, as part of James Cook's exploration of the Pacific. Approaching the southern shore, Cook's landing party was met by two Gweagal men with spears, surely an attempt to express sovereignty over the territory. However, when communication failed, Cook's party forced a landing under gunfire. After one of their men was shot and injured, the Gweagal retreated, for their spears were ineffective against the British weapons. Cook and his men then entered the camp. They took artefacts, including a number of spears, and left trinkets in exchange.²⁴ Joseph Banks wrote:

We therefore threw into the house to them some beads, ribbands, cloths &c. as presents and went away. We however thought it no improper measure to take away with us all the lances which we could find about the houses, amounting in number to forty or fifty.²⁵

Seven days later, after little further interaction with Aboriginal people, the Endeavour's crew sailed away. Cook wrote in his journal: 'All they seem'd to want was for us to be gone.'²⁶ Despite knowing the land was occupied, Cook, in the name of His Majesty King George the Third took possession of the whole Eastern Coast.²⁷ This was just the beginning of the illegal, immoral, cataclysm that continues to reverberate across generations and is now our inheritance.

I grieve the unjust loss of land, taken without consent, compensation or treaty. I recognise and honour the strength and resilience of First Nations

People. And I believe that from the beginning the Spirit of God has dwelled with the First Peoples of this ancient land.

In offering this reflection I admit that I am conflicted. Is it appropriate for me, as a white immigrant to these lands, to preach on this Sunday at the beginning of NAIDOC week? It was most unfortunate that the group reflection that was to come from women in the Kimberly had insurmountable technical issues that rendered it unsuitable to form into a podcast and our networks were bereft of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to call upon respectfully at the 11th hour. So it is with great humility that I embark upon the task.

The Gospel tells of Jesus sending out the 72 in pairs to all the towns and places he was to visit, saying “the harvest is rich, but the labourers are few.” He reminds them that he is “sending them out like lambs among wolves” and that they are to “carry no purse, no haversack, no sandals.” (Luke 10:2-4)

Until I was preparing this reflection, I had seen this text as a commissioning of missionaries to go out and proclaim the good news to the heathens such that they will come to know and experience the Christian gospel. But I have been stopped in my tracks. Is that not what has been done by colonisers, by missionaries who have come to these lands, and in particular evangelising Indigenous communities. Now, with 21st Century eyes and decolonising insight, I recognise and name these destructive colonizing strategies.

Garry Deverell in *Gondwana Theology* says; “The movement of Christ’s gospel into the Indigenous communities of this country was and is far from straight-forwardly positive.”²⁸ He goes on, “There is a saying in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities: ‘When the white man came, he made an exchange—the bible for their land and sea.’ Actually, it was far worse than that in most places. It was the bible in exchange for our language, lore and kin as well.”²⁹

How would it be if we were to reimagine this Gospel passage as Jesus inviting 72 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to go out in pairs and take their spiritual insights and proclaim the Kin_dom of God—to use Christian language—to those of us who have come across the seas and settled on this land? What might this look like? Sound like? Feel like? Firstly, we would need to stop. To listen to what the ancient people of this

ancient land have been trying to say for 250 years but has largely fallen on deaf ears.

Despite what we learnt in school, despite what has been written in history books, First Nations have always been here, sharing spiritual wisdom. For the last 250 years the First Peoples of this ancient land, has been attempting to share this wisdom with us colonisers. But alas, far too frequently, they have not been made welcome and have needed to retreat, shaking the dust off their feet.

So let us listen to just a few of those 72 sent out in our times.

Grace, an Aboriginal woman, whose voice would have been on our original recording for today, reminds us that in Aboriginal spirituality it is not about bringing knowledge to Country but Country sharing wisdom with us, so that being the seventy sent out is not just ‘what can we give to you’ but being open to receive.”³⁰

Grace’s words echo those of Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, 2021 Senior Australian of the Year. Miriam Rose in her acceptance speech lamented,

We have lived in this country for many thousands of years and 200 years ago we began to interact with white fellas. Since then, we have adapted to a new way of living. We learned to speak your English fluently. For years we have walked on a one-way street to learn the white man’s, white people’s way.³¹

She goes on to say,

I’ve learned to walk in two worlds and to live in towns and cities and even worked in them. Now is the time for you to come closer to understand us and to understand how we live and listen to what the needs are in our communities. When you come to visit or work in our communities and leave your comfort zones, I ask that you bring your knowledge and wisdom, but we ask you also to learn and understand how we live and function in our communities and listen to what our needs are.³²

How is it to hear the uncomfortable and confronting words of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women like those offered by Senator Lidia Thorpe, in her Maiden Speech to the Australian Parliament?

People like me were not meant to end up in places like this. Our voices were silenced, sidelined and written out of the story of our own country. ... I come from a long line of strong black women who taught me to stand up for what's right and never let injustice and racism beat you down. ... For Australia to become a mature, self-assured nation, we must recognise the long history of violence inflicted upon this country's First People and embark on a truth-telling journey to reconcile that past. These challenges are big, but so is the opportunity.

When we lose these sacred sites, we sever the deep spiritual ties that connect our culture and language to this land. Caring for country is at the heart of who we are as Aboriginal people. As custodians of this land for thousands of years, we understand that the health of the community is only as strong as the health of our environment. We're tired of watching governments and their agencies pay lip service to an acknowledgement of country while at the same time destroying the very land they claim to respect. When we don't show genuine care for the country that nurtures us, we all suffer. That's why we can't separate climate justice from First Nations justice.

To heal this land we must address the inequality and injustice faced by Aboriginal people. Black Lives Matter needs to be more than a trending hashtag. It must be a reckoning; a line in the sand; a call to action. To those whose skin colour affords them greater safety and justice, it's time to stop looking away from systemic racism and stand with us and say, 'no more'. ... 441 Aboriginal people have died in custody since the royal commission in 1991. Not a single person has ever been held accountable.

White Australia has a black history. We cannot change the past. But we can build a better future. We must reckon with our history so we can heal and move forward as one country, united by truth and common purpose. ... I invite you all to come on this journey with me, a journey of truth-telling, healing and justice. Together, we can build a brighter future.³³

Teela Reid, a senior solicitor, gives voice to two things she wants. "Firstly, for Australians to walk with us to enshrine a First Nations Voice in the Constitution and join us in the call to action for a referendum. ... And the second to enable the Walama Court process that allows elders and old people to come and sit at the table with judges and assist in decision making of defendants in Court."³⁴ She goes on "My hope is that Australians

understand that it is now time to shake the system from its very core and that is not a bad thing. These changes can only be embraced through the challenges of difficult conversations. Because it is not about reconciliation. This is about reckoning, with our past.”³⁵

This reckoning, that will lead to peace or in the words of Miriam Rose “When we heal ourselves, we heal our ancestors from the wounds that run deep in our family. When we heal our ancestors, we heal the world from wounds that run deep in humanity.”³⁶ The choice is ours. Will we welcome the proclaimers of the Kin_dom, or once again will the First Nations People need to shake the dust off their feet? Can we heed the call of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, addressed to the people of Australia, “We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future”?³⁷

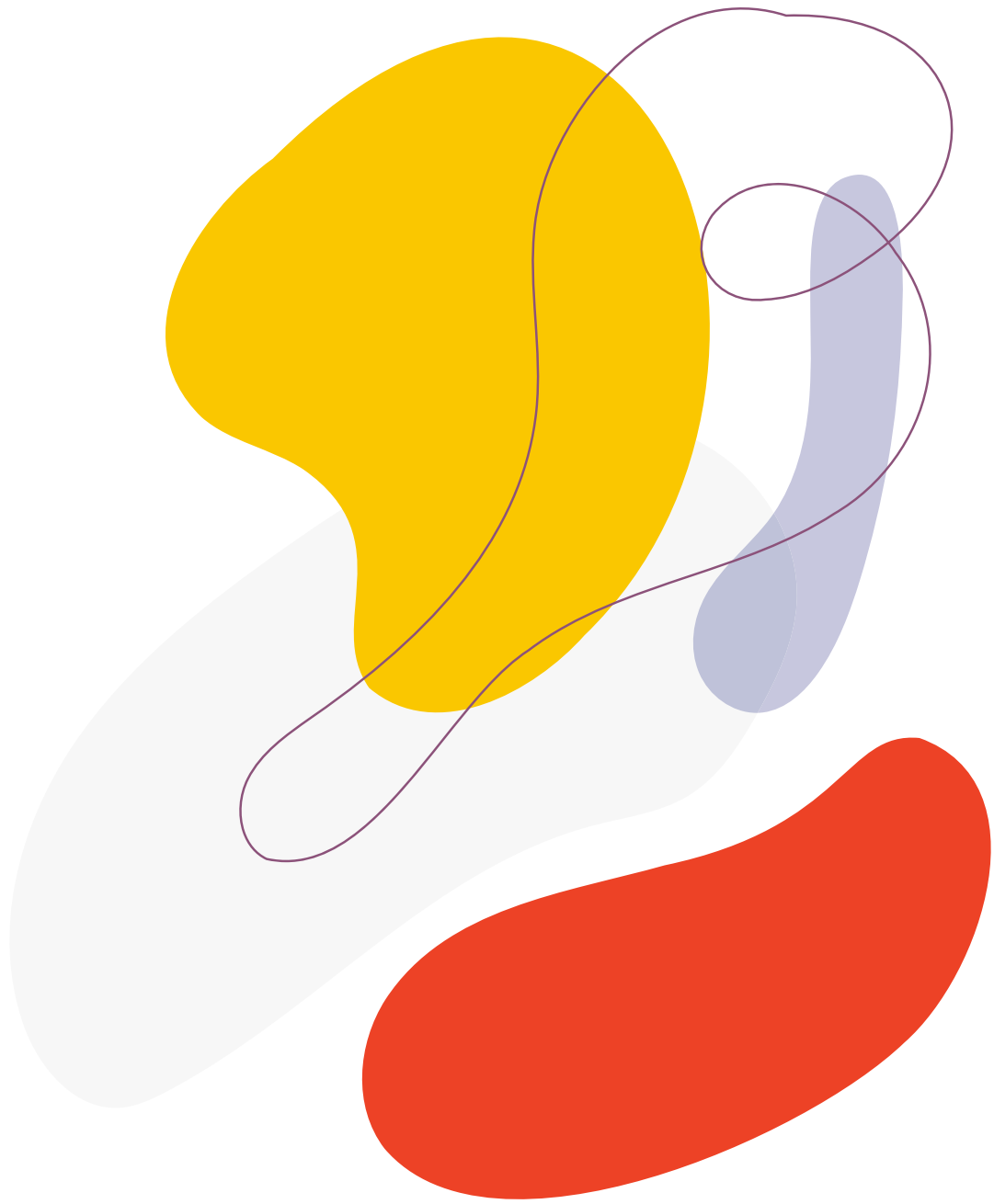
“Get Up, Stand Up, Show Up,” is the theme of this year’s NAIDOC week.³⁸ The author, Anita Heiss says, “When I think of this year’s NAIDOC theme, I think of the Wiradjuri word, ‘dirrayawadha’ which means to ‘rise up’. I think this year’s theme is a call to ACTION to all – sign the Uluru Statement, buy Black products, read First Nations literature, use your own platforms positively to bring awareness to the causes that matter most to you.”³⁹

So, I now invite you to take a moment to pause and consider how you will respond to the First Nations People that have been sent out “like lambs among wolves,” “carrying no purse, no haversack, no sandals”? Will we welcome or shun the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as they ‘speak truth’ or in the language of colonising Christians, proclaim the Good News?

I commenced this reflection acknowledging Country and the original custodians of these lands. I want to conclude by acknowledging those who have welcomed me, enriching my awareness and understanding of the Kin_dom of God, particular the women I have quoted.

Our Alleluia verse accompanying this Gospel comes from Colossians Chapter 3: “May the Peace of Christ reign in your hearts and the fullness of Christ’s message live within you.” So, as we sing our alleluias may we receive this peace as offered to us by the Ancient Peoples of these lands we now call Australia. Amen.

The sermon on which this text is based was originally offered as an Australian Women Preach Podcast, by Elizabeth Lee on the first Sunday of NAIDOC week, 3rd July 2022.



Your Faith has Made You Well

Text: Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26.

As I begin, I acknowledge the First Peoples of this place, the Darug and Gundungarra people, and their Elders past and present. I also acknowledge Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people present here today. I give thanks for all who have cared for this land, as well as for the wisdom, knowledge and resilience of my ancestors, whose country was Dharawal country. Nagganggbi! (Hello! in the language of the Dharawal people).

In today's gospel we hear a series of stories in which Jesus heals people. Texts of healing are common in the Gospels. I want to draw this text of faith and healing into conversation with another text of healing, the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

You may ask, "Why?" Because there is an illness in this land, an illness that has plagued people in this country from the moment that the first tall ships sailed into the places now called Botany Bay and Sydney Harbour, carrying convicts and settlers and colonisation. This illness is an illness from which this country and its people can begin to be healed, if we accept the generous and gracious invitation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and begin to engage in the struggle of Makarrata.

Why is this generous and gracious invitation so provocative, so difficult? Why has it taken six years for the invitation to find its way into serious discussion and consideration? That there is an illness in this land that requires healing is an idea that some find difficult to accept. Some say that we are well, that there is nothing wrong. Perhaps they do not see or experience the pain that this illness is causing. They may not recognise the extent of the illness because it doesn't impact them in their day-to-day life. Or, perhaps if they can see the pain, they are unable to imagine what their role might be in healing that pain. Furthermore, we just don't like to speak about racism, whether overt or casual. That is a conversation we find difficult to have, as is evidenced by the experience of some who have experienced racism for themselves, or have tried to engage our community in that discussion.

Yet, the illness remains and impacts us all, day by day and year by year, eroding our wellbeing as a nation and a community. Until we acknowledge

we are unwell, and, as the people in today's gospel illustrate, until we approach Jesus humbly and sincerely to ask for healing, our country will remain unwell. Whether we feel the pain of this illness personally, or not, there is a need for us all to open our eyes to the experience of those who are really suffering. The healing stories of our faith call us to that—to recognise the suffering—even if we feel unsure about what we might do to alleviate that suffering.

This year, we, as people of faith and justice are being called to respond, from our hearts, to the Uluru Statement from the Heart and to the call from First Nations people to create a Voice to Parliament. Just as people from all walks of life and circumstances approached Jesus for healing, so the people of this nation have a need to participate in the healing that will come when we have lived the path of Makarrata, as it is named in the Uluru Statement. First, that a Voice for First Nations people will be created and then, as that Voice is enshrined in the Constitution, it will be able to guide our national leaders through the next steps of treaty and truth. The aspiration of the Statement is that, by following this pathway, we might all come together after our historical struggles into a fair and truthful relationship that will bring health and healing to this land.

What I'm trying to express here is that the illness is not only a problem for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, but a desperate problem for us all. God's Word of Spirit and Truth, revealed in scriptures like that we read today from Matthew, speaks to the congregation here, and to the whole church, and to the whole of this nation, of our need for healing.

In fact, we from the house of faith are called to take the lead in this process of healing. The healing story we've heard today is also a story of calling. Matthew is called to follow Jesus. Just as Jesus invited fishermen to leave their work to follow him, here he also calls Matthew, as he sits at the tax collector's booth, to follow. That Matthew and Jesus then enjoy a meal together confuses those who watch at a distance, who cannot understand why Jesus would eat with tax collectors and sinners. This calling invites Matthew to embark on a very different way of living, a way that calls those who follow to confront injustice and to seek healing and reconciliation.

The next part of the story shows us that healing is both for all people and needed by all people. Now we see the rich and the poor, the named and the

unnamed, people of all genders, young people and older people, caught up in Jesus' all-embracing care. When Jesus answers the question posed to his disciples "why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners" he responds, "those who are well have no need of a physician, but only those who are sick." I do not think Jesus says this to spark a debate about who is sick and who is well, but rather to broaden the scope of the text to us all. For each and every one of us ought to consider where we need healing and help.

This text calls all of us to acknowledge that, as followers of Jesus, we all have illnesses that require healing. At the same time, we are each called to become a part of the work that seeks to heal, reconcile and renew all creation. If we are to participate in the coming of the new realm, the kingdom or kin-dom of God, we are called to participate in the healing of the ills of our very own society. To participate in healing the injustices of the past and present, as we move, pilgrim-like, towards the place of promise that Jesus' ministry illustrates in these glimpses of the life that has come and is coming through him.

In this, for every follower of Jesus is the promise: take heart, for our faith and discipleship has the power to make us well, and to equip us to be witnesses in our world and to make others well too. Here faith becomes more than a personal belief in God and moves to become an offering of our lives to God, trusting that as we become servants and speakers of the truth, we also become healers of the world, thus continuing the healing work of Jesus.

A healing of the systems that create and entrench injustice comes by a gathering together of those who follow Jesus for corporate action. People like us, when we gather to seek what is good and true and just in the Word of God, are also sent out into the world of God—its land, its people, all of creation—to find there the good and the true and the just as well.

Part of our calling and gathering here in worship is to continually wrestle with ancient texts, texts shared in the first generations of the faithful, then written down and translated and passed on from one generation to the next. How do we then also wrestle with the Uluru Statement—the culmination of the story of many more generations, carried from person to person, from kin to kin, lived and sung and danced since the beginning

of creation and a story written upon the land around us—far more ancient than the Biblical texts.

In 2017, after more than 60,000 years of this culture's incredible survival and resilience and connection to the spirit of land and country, at a gathering of people from all points of the southern sky, the descendants of those who first walked and lived and tended this land made by Creator God, brought their spiritual story and lived experience into writing. The Uluru Statement from the Heart asks that, just as we wrestle with other ancient texts, we also wrestle with what the colonisers have done to this land and its people in the last few hundred years.

A Gangulu woman called Lilla Watson is often credited with the quote: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."⁴⁰ In the context of Jesus' teachings in the story we read today, I'd like us to consider how our healing as a nation and our faithfulness as followers of Jesus is interdependent with the healing of those who have suffered since the colonisers arrived on these shores. Part of the call of both the Uluru Statement and Jesus is to be healed. The healing of Jesus' disciples and the healing of our nation are bound together. Furthermore, our healing as individuals and as a nation is bound up with the healing of First Nations people through connection to country.

This need for healing has come about through the great evils done by colonisers and their descendants. This illness in our nation is not a result of the actions or weakness of First Nations people, but of colonisers. So the burden for healing does not lie with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It lies with those of us who created the wounds and, now, especially, with those who follow Jesus, who are called to be people of justice and truth.

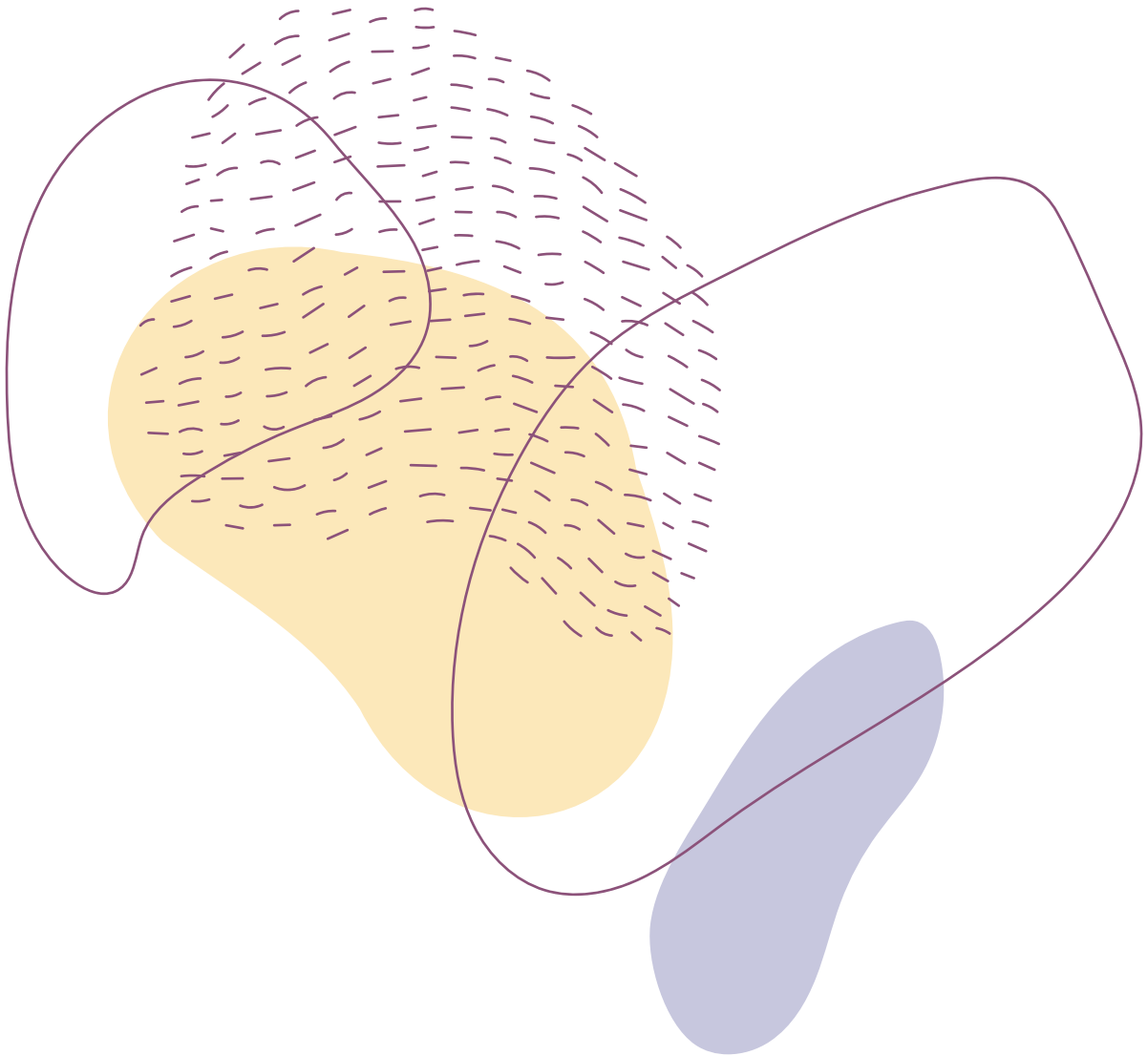
In the Uluru Statement the people of Australia are offered a gift and, in an echo of today's biblical text, they are also offered compassion and mercy. Note that the Uluru Statement does not expect the people of Australia to sacrifice or give up very much at all. Yet there is a call to change and conversion here. The Australian people are called to admit their need of healing in order to receive that healing and participate in the systemic

change that will bring voice and healing for the First People of this land now called Australia.

It is in this sense that our faith can make us well. Jesus calls us to be healed, restored, and renewed. But also to be agents of that healing and restoration for others and this whole nation.

Let us listen deeply to the Word of God,
and to this land
and to its First Peoples
so that we can understand how we can all be made well.
Amen.

The sermon on which this text is based was preached by Rev. Suzanne Stanton at St Andrews Uniting Church, Glenbrook, NSW, 11th June 2023.



God's love cleanses us

Text: Matthew 10:1-8

I think we are in a fairly strange moment in our history, this year, with the Referendum on a 'Voice to Parliament'. The Referendum comes two hundred and thirty-five years after the arrival of the First Fleet. It is the culmination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people trying to use their voice all that time, yet not having much success in being heard. We are in the midst of an attempt to create Australian identity as an integration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous identity. It is not easily done, but that is what the journey of reconciliation offers us. We should be looking to see what it offers us, not what our fears suggest that we might lose from the process.

We know that the land was occupied by the British without reference to the indigenous peoples already in possession since time immemorial (amounting to theft), and that the land has never been ceded by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander nations; and we know that the dispossession and marginalisation of Aboriginal people has been a blight on their lives for generations. The 'Closing the Gap' process acknowledges this and attempts some redress.

In 1992, the legal doctrine of 'terra nullius' was overturned by the High Court and shown to be a lie. Until 1992, we had been travelling along, as colonial people, on the assumption that this was all OK. Once it was acknowledged as a lie, the question then became, 'What do we do?'. So, eventually, after a few false starts, we had the spectacle of the Australian government, under Malcolm Turnbull, asking Aboriginal people what they thought a pathway to constitutional recognition might look like. The National Parliament set up a Referendum Council in December 2015. After sixteen months of work, they came back to the government with a full report, which was then summarized in the one-page Uluru 'Statement from the Heart'. So that is their answer to the question, 'What would a model, or a pathway, to reconciliation look like?'. You will be familiar with it by now: voice, treaty and truth, the latter two under the supervision of a Makarrata Commission.

Now, what I think is remarkable about the Uluru Statement is that it represents a wide consensus of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Estimates vary, but maybe eighty per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people affirm the statement as a road map for reconciliation and justice, with the Voice referendum as an acceptable first step.

I think we should concentrate, ourselves, on our Uniting Church stance and response. We have some experience in the Uniting Church at changing constitutions. We did it when we formed the Uniting Church. We changed our constitutions from Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregationalist, and the heavens did not fall in, in fact, those of us who joined the Uniting Church were quite excited at the time. We also changed it more recently when, in 2009, we accepted a Preamble that had been carefully negotiated with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, words acknowledging First Nations peoples as the original owners and custodians of the land. So, we know that changing a constitution is something that can be done. Not everybody knows this. Many people fear change simply because it is change. I think that this is a fear that is being exploited. I think that it is our job, as Uniting Church people, to reassure whoever we can that changing the constitution is really about making it more fit for purpose. It is not something that should worry us to do.

One of the important issues being discussed at present is the question of sovereignty. For Christians, sovereignty belongs to God. Sovereignty is God's business. God is the sovereign Lord, and all other sovereignties are under God. All other sovereignties, the sovereignty of nation states, the sovereignty of the individual conscience, the sovereignty of specialized knowledge and experience, they are all under God. Each of these lesser sovereignties are limited. But the idea of sovereignty is that that is where the buck stops, that is where the responsibility lies. So, when people talk about 'Team Australia', they are implying an idea of sovereignty which everybody needs to salute and line up behind. Our sovereignties are made to interact with each other, with respect for the limits of each. To me, this is the nature of sovereignty. I have sovereignty over my own body, but that says nothing about what is beyond my body. This is the doctrine of 'habeas corpus', that each person has sovereignty over their own body. In Christian theology, God empowers all these limited sovereignties but calls for each to respect the others. Without some clear hierarchy of sovereignties, conflict is inevitable, as we see in the emergence of the idea of the 'sovereign citizen'.

Now, the sovereignty of Aboriginal people in relation to land comes out of a long and symbiotic relationship with that land. This means that land is at the centre of every Indigenous culture and sense of identity. It is a very deep and spiritual connection. Their knowledge of land, and what makes for life and health on their land, is something that settler society will continue to ignore at its peril. Our way of life has been very exploitative of our natural world, with the limits to continued exploitation coming ever closer. Christianity, at least in our Protestant version of it, has not given us sufficient respect and care for our environment to counter this exploitation.

Turning to the gospel for today, Matthew 10:1-8, I am struck by what Jesus actually did in calling the disciples. All of us share in this calling as Christians. Jesus summoned his disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits - wow! —to cast them out and cure every disease and every sickness. This is a really significant authority. But what is an unclean spirit? It seems to me that an unclean spirit, as opposed to a demonic spirit, is one which is confused, which is subject to fears and is easily misled by those fears. It is not able to respect the authority of others, it is not able to love. The uncleanness is the confusion. The demonic power is one which has a much sharper focus, usually negative and evil. It is to do with fighting and anger and contempt. While these are very general and blurry distinctions, I find it helpful to think of the unclean spirits as ones that are confused. This confusion is linked to sickness and disease. So, this action by Jesus is quite a significant gift of authority.

This authority is from God. It brings the love of God to bear. It is the love of God which cleans up the unclean spirit. 'Perfect love casts out fear', as the first letter of John says so beautifully. Perfect love casts out fear. The aim of Jesus' mission was the kingdom of God, and this is what this gift is supporting.

'And these are the names of the twelve apostles'. Now, when you look at the names of the twelve apostles, one thing that should strike you is that they do cover a wide array of different groups within Israel at the time. There is Matthew, the tax collector, for example. A tax collector! We know about tax collectors. A servant of the Romans. A rich guy. Probably tempted to misuse his office for personal gain. A bad reputation, tax collectors. It is only Matthew who adds the designation, 'tax collector', so this might be an

example of self-disclosure. There is also Simon, the Cananaean. In Matthew and Mark, he is named as a Cananaean. The term 'Cananaean' might be another word for 'Zealot', or for people from the town of Cana, but it also might refer to the aboriginal people of Israel, from whom the land was taken under the leadership of Joshua. In general they would seem to have been subjugated and marginalized by the Roman occupation. What is Jesus doing, putting together a tax collector and a Zealot (or Cananaean)?

We also have Greek names (Philip) and more Jewish names, so we might argue that Sadducees and Pharisees are there. There are also the rich and poor. The ordinary people would not have the same wealth as Matthew the tax collector. And then there is Judas Iscariot! Who was Judas Iscariot? Judas was named Iscariot, a professional assassin, possibly because he betrayed Jesus. So, it is a very motley crew that we see in this list of twelve people.

So, what is Jesus on about, pulling together this group of twelve people? One thing that is left out is the women, but that is another matter. The political dimension of this, to me, is the important one. These people were brought together to learn to love each other, to learn to deal with each other's uncleanness, to build themselves together into a fellowship of love.

And what are they then sent out to do? They were to go nowhere among the Gentiles and into no town of the Samaritans. Go to your own people. Go to Israel, because you have what they need. You have what will clean up the people of Israel. What you have learned, accompanying me all this time, is what you need to offer something good to the wider society. To me, the mission of the twelve follows from the cleverness with which Jesus has pulled this group together.

As they go, they are to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near; they are to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. No light task! This is really miraculous stuff, most of it. And then it says, 'You received without payment, give without payment.' And I think that this is quite important as well, because every gift we have from God is susceptible to corruption. A gift that can bring blessing and benefit to people, if used for your own benefit, perhaps through asking for a lot of money to come back to you, clearly undercuts the purpose of God, and the presence of God within the use of the gift. So, receiving without payment and giving without payment is a truthful element in this commission.

So where does this leave us? It seems to me that in the Uniting Church, we have accepted this calling, to seek the healing of our nation, to listen to all the voices in our society, and not just those we like, to seek the Spirit of God and to spread the love of God in whatever way we can manage to do that. God requires truth and justice from us all. That is always the case, but at this particular time, it seems to me that we should be acknowledging that the road ahead for reconciliation is going to be longer than simply establishing a Voice to Parliament. The Voice to Parliament is good; it is a first step in what you might call the new road map that we have been given with the 'Statement from the Heart'. But it is only the first step, and we should acknowledge that. It should not be a secret from the wider society that this is something whose consequences we can't know. We don't know what form the Voice will take until it is put together by the Parliament. We don't know how successful it will be until it is working, and we don't know what else it will have to deal with until we hear the voice from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in a clearer way than we have managed up to now. So, it is an uncertain future that we are heading into, and that is what is scaring lots of people at the moment, because they don't know, because they are uncertain; and it may mean that we end up losing the vote. If we do lose the vote, then I think that the same thing is going to have to keep coming back until we get to a genuine, owned reconciliation.

So, my take home from these reflections is that we should pray for the Spirit of Truth to open us to our history, particularly through the voices of those who have been most seriously and badly affected by that history. And we should also pray for genuine reconciliation through voice, treaty, and truth in our land.

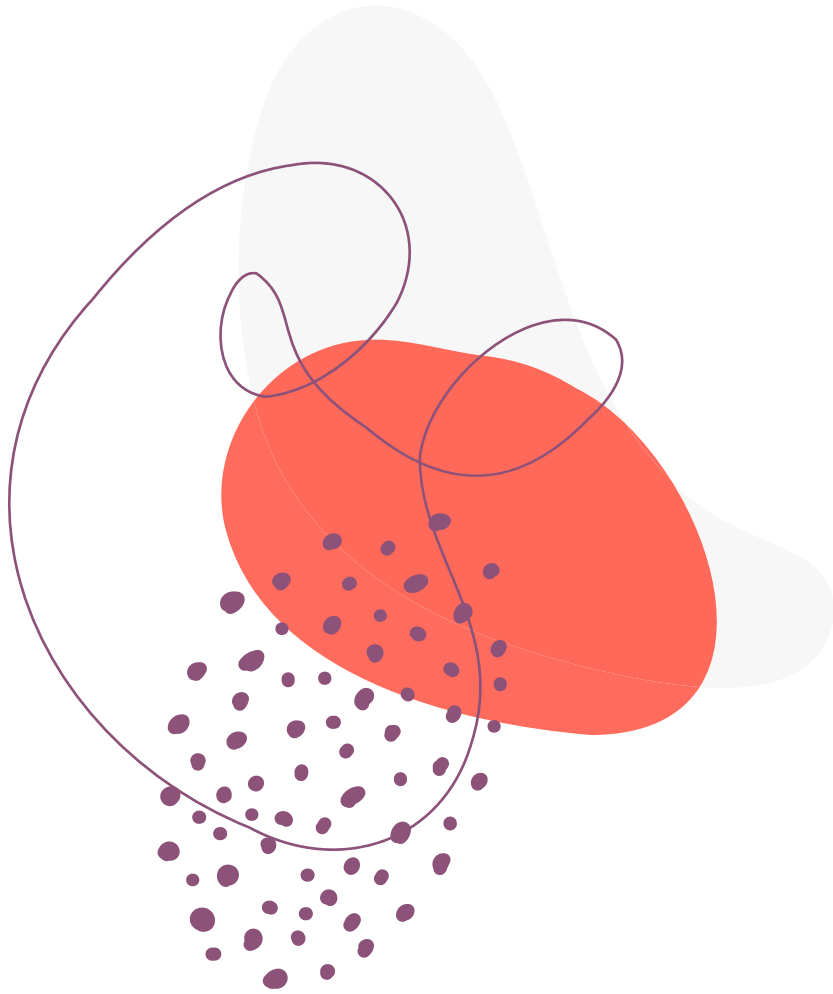
Let us pray.

Lord God, we do pray for your truth, the truth of our history, to be made known to us and to all in Australia, in whatever way that becomes possible. We also pray that this truth may be healing and open the door to genuine reconciliation and fullness of life, that you do promise us.

In Jesus name we pray.

Amen

The sermon on which this text is based was preached by the Rev Dr Sandy Yule at Wesley Church, Melbourne, Victoria, 18th June 2023.



Nobody is Out of Sight, Out of Mind, for God: A Call to Listen

Texts: Genesis 21.8-21; Matthew 10.24-39

Out of sight, out of mind. Abraham and Sarah finally have their heir, their son Isaac. So Ishmael, the son that Hagar bore to Abraham, was not needed any more. Hagar and Ishmael were not wanted any more. And Hagar was a foreign slave, away from her land, away from her people, away from her kin. She was easy to discard. So they were sent away, out into the wilderness, with only scant supplies: some bread, and a skin of water. They were provided just enough to soothe Abraham's conscience. Off they went. Out of sight, out of mind.

Take a moment to picture yourself as Hagar. You have just those scant rations, and a young child that you love dearly, and you're walking out into the wilderness, holding that child's hand, with no idea what to do. First, the food runs out. And then, soon after, the water runs out. Your child, the child that you love, starts to get weaker, and weaker.

In both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the wilderness is a strange place, a liminal place. In Hebrew, the word for wilderness is **רִבְדִּי**. It has the same letters as the word "speaking."⁴¹ Hagar, exiled, away from all aid, all hope, is in the place of speaking. So she speaks: "Do not let me look upon the death of the child." Who will hear her voice? God. God hears her voice. Out of sight, out of mind, Hagar doesn't just speak. She prays. Nobody is out of sight, out of mind, for God. God listens, God answers her prayer. God provides for her, God cares for her.

For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
and one's foes will be members of one's own household.
(Mt 10:35-36 NRSV UE)

We heard these words in today's Gospel, as Jesus declares his mission, his purpose. They are uncomfortable words, difficult words. And you might be wondering what they have to do with the story of Hagar and Ishmael.

We are disciples. We follow our Lord. We follow Jesus. And so, these words are meant for us. And today, Christ, through the Gospel, blesses us with discomfort. For us, there can be no 'out of sight, out of mind.' We can't just look after our own, the people we know, those comfortable people that we know and love, our families, our friends, the people of this parish. We're called to something more challenging. We're called to a costly discipleship. We are called to continue the work of Christ in the world, even when it's difficult, even when it brings discord. Gathered here today, to celebrate the Eucharist, we are the Body of Christ. Through worship, through sacrament, we are reminded that we are Christ's body on Earth, here, and now. We are Christ's hands, Christ's arms, Christ's ears.

There are many people, many Australians, who are out of sight, out of mind. Many people are struggling, struggling to put a roof over their heads, struggling to pay their bills, struggling to put food on the table. But there are other struggles in our society too. We meet to worship on the land of the Noongar people. This land was taken without discussion, without agreement, without treaty. The first settlers here put fences up, took food and water from the land, and often shared little of what they had brought with the people who were already here.

How many Hagers have there been among the Noongar people, dispossessed from their land, alone, trying to look after the children they love?

Reconciliation of that wrong, which has existed since the beginning of settlement, which has continued for generations, and which continues today, is Christian business.

Soon, there will be a referendum on the Voice to Parliament. At its last meeting, the Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Perth endorsed the Voice. I'll tell you up front that I intend to vote yes. How we each of us vote is for our own prayerful discernment. But voting is only one part of the referendum. This is a holy opportunity. A holy opportunity to listen, to hear voices that we don't often hear. Representatives from Australia's First Nations will be speaking. Many will argue for a yes vote, some will argue for a no. But few of those First Nations representatives will argue for the status quo, for Australia to continue as it is, completely unchanged. This will be a difficult referendum, a highly political time. Many of the First Nations representatives speaking will be Christians, Christians living a costly discipleship.

I'm not a First Nations person, and I can't imagine what it must be like to have to argue for your own inclusion, for a better future, for reconciliation, for an end to historical injustice. I'm sure this referendum will generate much discussion across the dinner tables of our country, much discussion in church halls, at social events. And with that will come some discord. Jesus, in today's Gospel, encourages us not to shy away from that.

Even when there is discord, even when it's difficult, we are called to discipleship. We are called to offer the perspective of our faith. We are called to build up God's kingdom. I believe that in this referendum, we will see God at work in the world, the God so boldly proclaimed by Mary in the Magnificat. The God who lifts up the lowly. The God who upsets the mighty.

How ever we intend to vote, we can offer a Christian perspective.

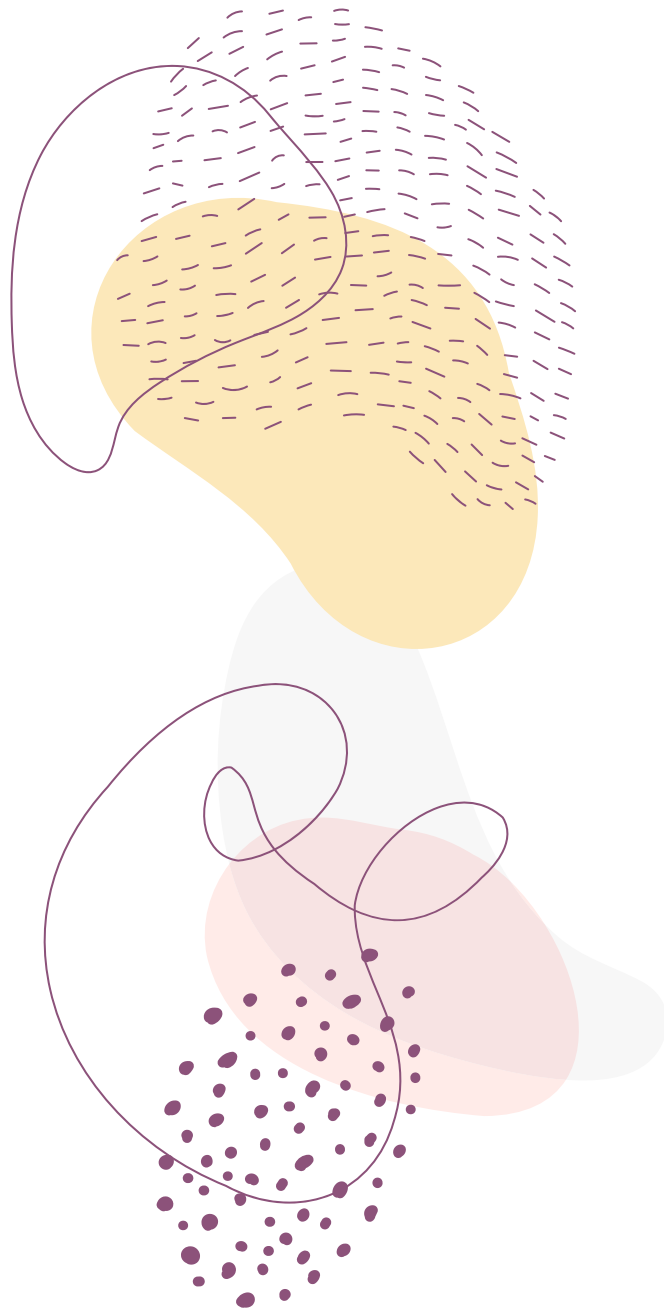
All human beings are created in the image of God.
All human beings are loved by God, totally, and equally.
All human beings are worthy of dignity.

Like God listened to Hagar, we can take this opportunity to listen to the diverse voices of the First Nations of this land. I will now read the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

(The Uluru Statement from the Heart is read.)

Amen.

The sermon on which this text is based was preached by Rev Grahame Bowland at the Anglican Parish of Kalamunda-Lesmurdie (St Barnabas Kalamunda, St Swithun's Lesmurdie), W.A., on Sunday 25th June 2023.



Yes, and...

Texts: The Uluru Statement from the Heart; Revelation 3.20

Unlike the other sermons in this collection, this one is undated. It is undated because it hasn't been delivered. I had intended to deliver this sermon in July 2023. I chose July because that is the month in which the Uniting Church in Australia entered a Covenant with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Congress in 1994. Precisely where I intended to deliver the sermon is not important. As a lay person, I travel and lead worship in a range of communities. For present purposes, let's call the community in which I had hoped to deliver this sermon "Anywhere". What unfolded in Anywhere is not unique to that particular place; instead, it reflects a broader reality in communities across our nation at this moment in history. What happened in Anywhere is happening everywhere, in some shape or form.

The Voice to Parliament was the theme of my intended sermon. Our current Uniting Church Assembly President, Reverend Hollis, has described the Voice to Parliament as a moral and theological issue, not a political one: "Like Jesus, we are called to be bearers of justice, not just in our words, but in our actions and by changing systems which continue to deny the place and rights of the first Australians." However, some individuals in Anywhere believed that the church was not the place to lend support to the Voice. It would be better to stick to the lectionary, they thought. I demurred. It was not my place to upset theirs. Except, perhaps it was.

Our Christian faith owes its very existence to Jesus's reputation for not doing things by the book. In Jesus, we encounter a God who embraces and includes those whom the law, dogma, history, and cultural norms seek to exclude. Whenever the emperors and the kings, the priests and the public said 'No', our God—as revealed through Jesus—said 'Yes'.

Yes, to an unmarried woman from Nazareth.

And, yes, to pagans from the East.

And, yes, to lowly shepherds.

And, yes, to a Canaanite woman.

And, yes, to tax collectors most despised.

And, yes, to a little man who sought refuge in a tree.

And, yes, to the ritually impure.

And, yes, to a woman who had been married to five men and was now living with a sixth.

And, yes, to a dying thief on a cross.

To have said 'Yes' to any one of these would have been right and just; to have said 'Yes' to all is divine.

The cadence of our faith is captured by the words 'yes, and'. It is through living these words that we realise God's vision of building a social order that can be likened to a house with many rooms, or a banquet with many guests. The way of Christ is generous and abundant in its capacity to make space for others. The words 'yes, and' remind us to look back at the proud moments in which our Church has led the way in removing barriers to fellowship; they also inspire us to look ever forward in search of new ways to share and multiply God's love and dignity.

In 1994, the Uniting Church said 'Yes' to a Covenant with First Nations people. In the Covenanting Statement to the UAICC Chairperson, the President of the Seventh Assembly said:

Long before my people came to this land your people were here. You were nurtured by your traditions, by the land, and by the Mystery that surrounds us all and binds all creation together.

My people did not hear you when you shared your understanding and your Dreaming.⁴²

Centuries and decades later, First Nations people are still seeking to be heard.

In 2023, Australians are being called to say 'Yes' to a constitutional change that will make it easier to hear First Nations peoples' views on the laws and policies that incarcerate their children, impoverish their communities, undermine their culture, devalue their knowledge, and exclude them from systems that have flourished on the very lands from which they were dispossessed.

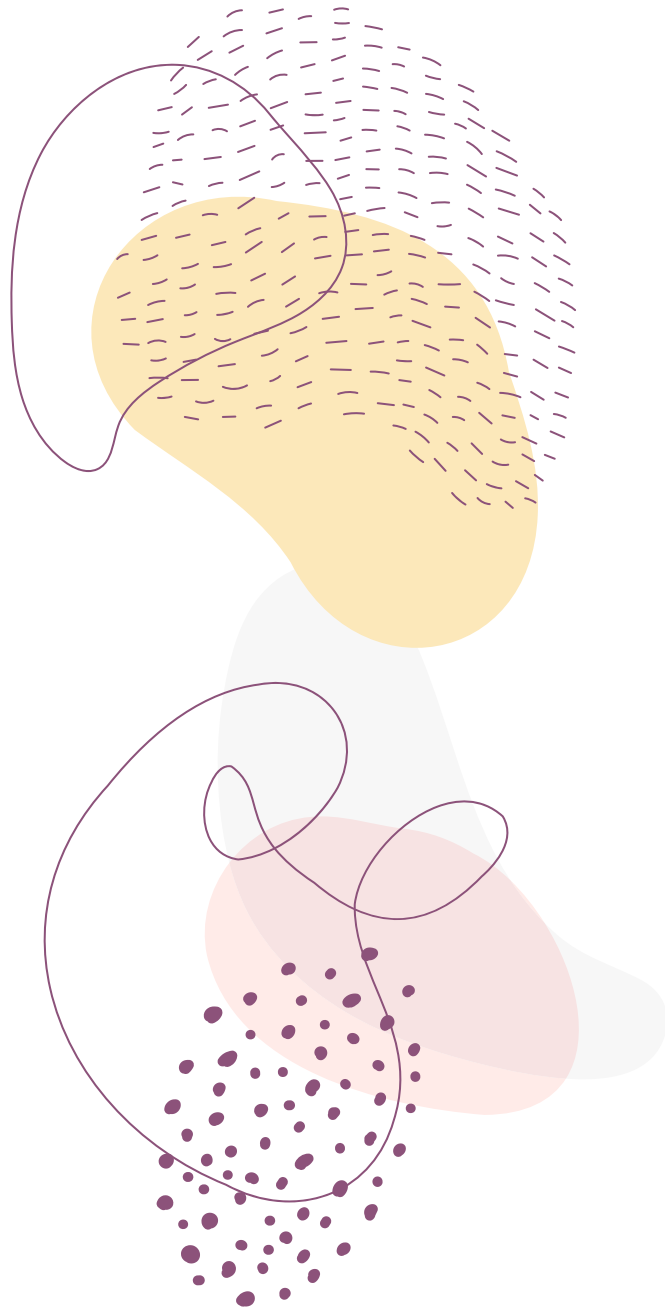
In the Covenant with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, we made a commitment to advance God's kingdom of justice

and righteousness, redress structural disadvantage and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' right to self-determination. The Voice to Parliament is consistent with each of these covenantal commitments. How can we say anything other than 'Yes'? And, once the vision for a Voice is realised, it will be incumbent on us to keep looking for opportunities to say Yes. Yes, to truth telling. Yes, to Makarrata. Yes, to structural reforms address the ongoing legacies of colonialism.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart ends with these words: "We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future." Through them, I am reminded of Christ's message to John: "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you, and you with me" (Revelation 3:20).

We have been graciously invited to answer a call for fellowship from First Nations sisters and brothers. It behoves us to respond by walking with them to support their call for justice "across this vast country"—anywhere and everywhere.

The text for this sermon was submitted by Dr Daniel Vujcich of W.A. for preaching in July 2023.



The Voice: from the grassroots and the seashores

Text: Psalm 24.1

Good morning everyone. As a Torres Strait Islander on Aboriginal land, I acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land where we are all gathered, the Jagera and Turrbal peoples, and pay respects to their Elders past and present. I thank God for bringing us together to this beautiful and sacred place.

May I also greet you all in my people's language, *Kalaw Kawaw Ya*.

Mina kapu bathaynga mura ngithamulpa.

Good morning to you all.

Ina ngalpa garwoeydhamin nabi maygi boeradhanu.

For us to gather here at this holy place.

Ngalpa lake eso manin Awghadhapa nabi goeygipa

We give thanks to God for this day.

Ubilnga matha kedha ngitha ngurpemin ngoeymun igililmaynu a.

I would like you to learn our cultural way of life.

Pudhamin mura ngalpalpa ngulaygoepa yananab

So that each and every one of you understand.

My name is Aunty Rose Elu. My people are from the beautiful island of Saibai in the top western Torres Strait Islands. When I was young my chief father gathered his children around him and told us stories. One of the stories my father told his children was about the migration of my people from Saibai to the country of the Angamuthy and Yadaykhenu on

Queensland's northern peninsula area, commonly known as the Cape York Peninsula. In the late-1940s, my people needed to migrate to seek safety from the threat of tsunami and malaria. We believe that God spoke into the hearts of our Elders and led them to the First Peoples of the peninsula, including to the Angamuthy and Yadaykhenu peoples. My father and other Saibai Elders understood that moving to another people's territory meant seeking their consent. So, my father, along with other Elders, sailed to the peninsula one night to do this, bravely breaching Queensland legislation that controlled the movement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. They were met on the beach by the peninsula's First Peoples who were waiting to welcome an unknown arrival. Somehow God had spoken into their hearts, directing them to the beach to wait for and welcome our Elders. Even though the Queensland government had drawn up boundaries without the consent of the peninsula's traditional custodians, my father knew that he had to seek permission from these custodians and respect their protocols before we migrated. They welcomed my people graciously and we live together harmoniously to this day.

Before building what was to become our new home, my father went to the peninsula's First Peoples to seek their counsel about the best trees for building and for their consent to cut some down. They showed him some trees between two hills. My father then set about building a house by hand for my family of twelve. This involved moving a lot of very heavy timber. By the time Mum and we ten siblings came, my father and his brothers had built a seven-bedroom home with a wraparound verandah. I have vivid memories of being welcomed by the Angamuthy and Yadaykhenu peoples. As an Elder, I now gather my grandchildren and grandnieces and grandnephews around me and tell them stories. This is one I like to tell them.

When I was about six or seven, my father and uncles set sail in a small dinghy from Seisia to Thursday Island. We were near Seisia when our boat capsized. Because I couldn't swim yet, my father and uncles passed me from one to another to get me to shore safely. They then carried me to the village in Seisia where my adopted Aboriginal grandparents rubbed my legs with goanna oil to strengthen them. It was common for my adopted Aboriginal family to lovingly care for us all with bush medicine when we were sick or injured. God calls us to respect one another. This, in part at least, involves respecting people's territories, traditions and protocols, seeking counsel and consent and caring for one another. When respect is fostered, harmony

presides. When respect is denied, harm is caused.

However, harm can be healed through full reconciliation. The etymology of the term 'reconciliation' stems from the Latin *re*, which means 'back', and *conciliare*, which means 'bring together'. The Uluru Statement From the Heart says this:

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs.

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

The Statement goes on to say that:

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood.

The Uluru Statement was signed by two hundred and fifty Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives in May 2017. These representatives were appointed by Indigenous communities after six months of consultation across the country. The signatories invite the Australian people's support in two endeavours: constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians as the First Peoples of these lands through the creation of a permanent Voice to Parliament and the creation of a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making and truth-telling about our shared history.

I like that the Yolngu word *makarrata*, which means 'coming together after a struggle', has a similar meaning to the English word 'reconciliation', which means 'bring back together'.

Torres Strait Islander peoples perceive and experience sovereignty in a different way to people from Western contexts. For us, sovereignty is about how we nurture the land, sea and sky, recognising that the land, sea and sky sustain us in everyday life. Thus, sovereignty is about belonging, a belonging that is preserved through maintaining a sacred balance.

Psalm 24.1 says that, ‘The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.’ We recognise that God is ultimately sovereign. God made us the First Peoples of the Torres Strait Islands. God gave us the islands thousands of years ago to take care of — the God we know in our Melanesian way, in our cultural way. My gently spoken mother was a nurturer. She modelled, rather than talked about, her cultural knowledge, including in the way she only harvested what she needed and what she could replenish. She always put the ashes from a cooking fire into the garden, knowing that wood ash contains nutrients that benefit plant growth. When she harvested from our gardens, she always dug the soil back in. When we ate fish, she showed us how to bury the bones into the garden. These practices were undertaken to put life back into the soil.

Our cultural foods include *bisi* (casava), *wapi* (fish) and *urugubaw* (sweet potato). We like to cook our foods in *woerabaw ikay* (coconut milk) in an *amay* (earth oven). We drink *ariu nguki* (rainwater) and *woerabaw nguki* (coconut water). Everything we eat and drink traditionally is pure and alive. Nothing is refined or processed.

What can other Christians learn from us, about our sovereignty and associated principles and practices? Other Christians can be part of this ongoing legacy. They, too, can learn to cherish the land, sea and sky. For a start, we invite other Christians to see that we are Christian in our own way. The Bible was introduced to us by the London Missionary Society and Melanesian leaders in 1871. We call this the ‘Coming of The Light’ and we celebrate it annually. When I was a teenager living in Seisia on the peninsula, I often asked my father and older priest brother about the Coming of The Light. I didn’t understand why it was called this. I thought that our people had always been in the light. Their response was, ‘Yes. That is true. We were always in the light. When the missionaries brought us the light of scripture, the light of the Gospel unified with ours.’

It’s important for all Christians to appreciate that Jesus was present in and with my people before the Bible — before the Gospel — came to the Torres

Strait Islands on that special day in 1871. Our spirituality lies in the land, sea and sky and since time immemorial our people have believed in a Creator. We just didn't know yet that the Creator was the Christian God, the same God who made us custodians of the land, sea and sky. God was on both sides of the beach. And, as such, when my people and the missionaries met, our stories were joined. So the Coming of The Light commemorates the Gospel coming to us and giving us a name for our Creator, in whose image we are all made.

However, this is not the message that children's Bibles published in the English language told me when I was a child. When I was at Sunday School, I remember looking at an illustration of Jesus in a children's Bible. Jesus was pictured as a man with very fair skin. Sitting on his knees were fair-skinned children, whom he was happily conversing with. At his feet sat a dark-skinned girl who reminded me of me. 'Why was Jesus not smiling at and talking with her also?' I wondered. I felt alienated and excluded by this illustration rather than welcomed and included. Sharing a story like this takes a spirit of openness and courage. It also takes openness and courage to be willing to listen to such a story.

There are many other stories that take openness and courage to listen to.

Our people are buried in the earth — in their resting places. I was recently talking to a close family member on Saibai. We spoke about how the high tides, which are caused by a damaged climate, are distressingly washing away our ancestors' resting places. I asked him, 'What are our ancestors telling us?' He said, 'What is happening is wrong. This is our ancestors' way of showing how God's creation is being abused.'

You see, our ancestors are telling us that humanity's behaviour is impacting the sea. As traditional custodians, we believe that God's ways and wisdom are written in the land, sea and sky, in Creation. We believe that we need to listen to what God tells us through the land, sea and sky. God values balance and an orientation towards sharing. If we wish to preserve what God has and is writing, we need to cherish what God values. Like the soil, we only take from the sea what we need to preserve balance, and so there is always food to share with other people and the sea creatures. Because we are seafaring people, for us the water is even more sacred than

the soil, and that's saying a lot. The land is about regeneration, about new shoots. The sea is different. The ocean symbolises the depths of God's love. We cannot fathom it or properly understand its depths. When we feel heavy, we give the heaviness to God by unloading it into the sea. God and the sea are one. Jesus calmed the storm. For us the sea brings peace.

The *malu*, or ocean, vitalises us. When the wind blows, we receive the ocean spray on our faces. It's energising, especially on humid days. God blesses us through the ocean as the waves and the current go in and out. The ocean is sacred to us. As part of my baptism as a baby, my mum removed my clothing and nappy and held me up in the sea breeze to be sprayed, to first be blessed, by the ocean. She then took me to the church for the service.

Churches are leaders when it comes to Reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. For example, National Reconciliation Week started as the Week of Prayer for Reconciliation in 1993. Today National Reconciliation Week is celebrated in secular workplaces, schools and childcare centres, community organisations, and by individuals Australia-wide. For meaningful reconciliation with First Peoples to happen, we need to create spaces for listening in Churches and in other institutions. We need to connect our stories, as we did when God was on both sides of the beach when the Bible came to my people. We also need to unite the unique strengths of our knowledges and ways. I believe we can do all this with a successful referendum.

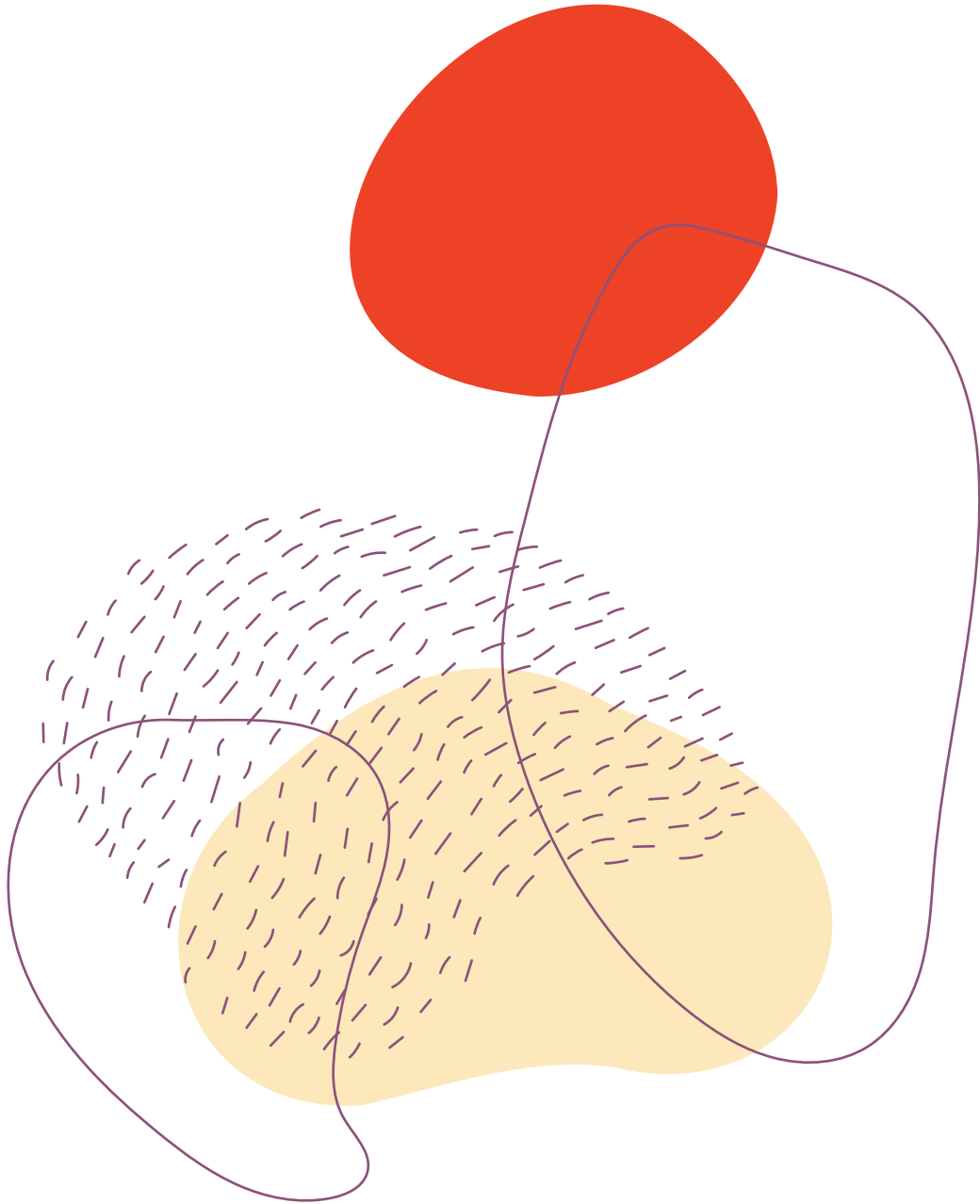
I remember voting in the 1967 referendum when over 90 percent of voters voted 'yes' in what became a watershed moment in our shared history, especially in the way it united all of us. The 1967 referendum helped lead to the dismantling of state-based assimilationist policies that included stealing children from their loving families and controlling people's movements. This year's referendum about recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Constitution through a Voice to Parliament will build upon the 1967 referendum's remarkable legacy. So I will again be writing 'yes', from my heart, on this year's referendum ballot paper. And I look forward to contributing my views from my people's grassroots and seashores to the Voice so that Parliament and the Government can better listen to our ways and our ancient wisdom, including about how to cherish the land, sea and sky.

This "Prayer of The Light" was made by one of the former Bishops of the Diocese of North Queensland, the late Bishop Eric Hawkey. Let us pray.

O' Christ the light of the world
We thank you that your light shines among us
Draw us ever closer to you
So that free from sin
We may show forth the light of you glory in the world.

Amen.

The sermon on which this text is based was preached by Aunty Dr Rose Elu at Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Fortitude Valley, Queensland, 23rd July 2023.



Postlude: a reflection on the 'Preaching from the Heart' project.

Australian churches were called to engage with the Statement from the Heart in the context of an historic referendum for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament. This call was placed before Australian churches by the Creator God who gives us our being in this land and was given voice again by Professor Anne Patel-Gray, Head of the School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Divinity. It was a call that demanded our response. The Creative Ministries Network Congregation, which arose from a struggle for justice for families bereaved by work-related deaths, recognised the importance of listening and responding to God's Word to guide the response of Australian churches. We called for sermons from Indigenous and settler/non-Indigenous preachers across the nation to submit up to two sermons they have preached that proclaim God's Word of spirit and truth to their congregation about the gift to the Australian people in the historic Statement from the Heart and the referendum.

We deemed that the referendum for a Voice to the Australian parliament for Aboriginal and Torres Strait people meant discerning what God's justice demands of us.

These guidelines were adopted for sermons to qualify for publication:

1. How Christians may respond to the spiritual notion of Indigenous people's sovereignty.
2. How Christians may respond to the proposition of Indigenous theologians that Country itself is a sacred text.
3. How Christians may hear the truth of suffering and injustice borne by Indigenous people acknowledged in the Statement from the Heart as due to the colonial invasion and theft of their land.
4. How God's Word of spirit and truth revealed in scripture speaks to church and nation about the gift to the Australian people in the Statement from the Heart.
5. How those who hear this preaching are called by Christ to respond from their hearts to the referendum for a Voice to parliament.

We hoped to publish at least twelve sermons, and we received twenty-nine. We invited Rev. Dr. Garry Worete Deverell, and Bishop Philip

Huggins to be the editorial team, and they eventually selected the sermons for publication. Each sermon was de-identified before it was sent to the editors, whose enthusiasm for the project has been generous and always encouraging. We invited each author to respond to feedback from Dr. Deverell, and all have done this with grace and commitment to the promised journey to a new future for our country. Garry's dedication to engaging with the selected authors has inspired and strengthened our understanding and appreciation of the significance of listening to God's Word in the context of responding to the grave injustice wrought by colonialism.

Then we realised we had run out of time to publish a book prior to the date of the referendum. Fortunately, the decision to publish a PDF version has been supported by several contributors as we finalised their texts. Two other matters bear deeper reflection for our congregation's future work. One is paying attention to the importance of culture and language for how people may be engaged. The other is how to deal with conflict and misunderstanding. Our processes then could do better in building solidarity and mutual understanding for all participants.

This project has also planted a seed for the future. From my first reading, the 2017 Statement from the Heart spoke to my heart. Speaking from their own hearts after gathering from all points of the southern sky, as many as 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders at the National Constitutional Convention called on their unbroken connection with their ancestors to remind settler Australians that they are the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under their own laws and customs. These words struck a chord because the word 'sovereign' is rarely used in everyday conversation.

The first time I saw the word 'sovereign' used in a meaningful sense was in a commentary on the Book of Isaiah by renowned Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, when he referred to the sovereignty of God as a counterclaim to the imperial claims of Assyria and Babylon. I understood from reading of God's sovereignty in Isaiah that the prophetic word spoke strongly against colonising nations: "All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit" (Isaiah 44:9a); the idols they make are worthless.

For God's sovereignty pre-dates any Constitution. The Australian Constitution is simply the work of (colonising) hands to provide a legal framework for how Australia is governed – no more.⁴³ The constitution is not sacred, never to be changed or improved as Australians recognise a better way ahead. From a Christian perspective, the Constitution's governance framework sits under the sovereignty of the Creator God's justice and mercy. I read the Statement of the Heart as an invitation to the Australian people to recognise that an equally powerful sovereignty resides in First Nations people, and the claim of their sovereignty must at last be given a Voice in the more limited legal sovereignty of the national Constitution.

If the Australian church is to claim its authority to witness for justice under the sovereignty of the God we worship through Jesus Christ, it will need to address how we honour the sovereignty of First Nations people in their struggle for justice. This requires the Australian church to make a new commitment to treaty in the spirit of truth-telling about our failures, small and large. It is in the space of such humble confession we may better hear God's 'yes' to the Statement from the Heart and to the referendum. We have a lot of work to do to realise the promise and hope envisioned in the Statement from the Heart's journey of voice, treaty, truth.

John Bottomley
Program Coordinator
Creative Ministries Network Congregation
sermonfromtheheart@gmail.com
4 September 2023.

Endnotes

- 1 Since 2019 the Uniting Church has marked a Day of Mourning to reflect on the dispossession of Australia's First Peoples and the ongoing injustices faced by First Nations people in this land. ... The observance of a Day of Mourning on the Sunday before 26 January arises from a request from the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) which was endorsed by the 15th Assembly in 2018. We invite you on or around Sunday 22 January to hold worship services that reflect on the effects of invasion, colonisation and racism on First Peoples. See <https://uniting.church/dayofmourning/>
- 2 For an introduction to the so-called 'history wars' over the interpretation of European colonisation of Australia, including the 'Three Cheers' view and the 'black armband' view, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_wars#:~:text=He%20contrasted%20this%20with%20the,believed%20to%20be%20pretty%20good%22.
- 3 I first came across the description of this country as 'the lands now called Australia' in a prayer by Aboriginal Christian leader Brooke Prentis. See <https://www.brookeprentis.com/about>
- 4 This quotation is taken from Archbishop Tutu's Acceptance Speech for the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize. See <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1984/tutu/lecture/>
- 5 See, for instance, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/oct/26/indigenous-voice-proposal-not-desirable-says-turnbull#>
- 6 For discussion of the history and proposals for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament, including proposals of the Morrison government see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigenous_Voice_to_Parliament
- 7 See, for instance, https://deadlystory.com/page/culture/history/Creation_of_reserve_system which explains how the reserves and missions where Indigenous people were placed after being forcibly removed from their land had strict rules and restrictions regarding what Indigenous people could and could not do. Speaking language and participating in ceremony were banned.
- 8 Although the Uluru statement from the Heart appeared almost out of the blue to many Australians in 2017, the groundwork had been laid over at least a decade in various forums and bipartisan initiatives.
- 9 Gorman, Amanda, *The Hill We Climb*
- 10 Samantha Dick, ABC News, 9 June, 2023. (It's been 35 years since Bob Hawke was presented with the Barunga Statement. What's changed? - ABC News accessed 22/8/2023)
- 11 Money For Mission - Uniting Church in Australia. Synod of Victoria and Tasmania (uca.org.au) (accessed 22/8/2023).
- 12 Uluru Statement: a quick guide – Parliament of Australia (aph.gov.au) (accessed 4/9/2023).
- 13 On October 14, Australians will be asked to consider this question, answering with a Yes or No. "A Proposed Law: to alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. Do you approve of this proposed alteration?" The Voice to Parliament wording & questions: what the referendum will ask | news.com.au (accessed 4/9/2023).
- 14 Gafney, Wilda, *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church*, Kindle Edition. New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2021 p. 338.
- 15 <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/may/26/sacred-indigenous-site-on-sunshine-coast-defaced-with-religious-message>
- 16 <https://about.csu.edu.au/community/accc/about/latest-news-assets/2023/listening-to-scripture-by-prof-stan-grant>
- 17 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iz8Xlk4dH8> Speech by Stan Grant on ABC Q+A before taking a break from the media. Aired on ABC television on Monday 22 May 2023
- 18 This is a paraphrased quote from J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Collector's ed, [The Hobbit /The Lord of the Rings], Pt. 1 (London: HarperCollins, 2013), 270.
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21 This homily was originally offered as an Australian Women Preach Podcast, for the 3 July 2022, the first Sunday of NAIDOC week, 2022. <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/awp/episodes/69--Elizabeth-Lee---3-July-2022-e1kcmhg/a-a86725c> I am grateful for Rev Dr Garry Deverell's editorial comments that I have now incorporated into the reflection offered here.

22 I was introduced to the phrase, "these lands we now call Australia" by Brooke Prentis an Aboriginal Christian Leader, a descendant of the Wakka Wakka peoples. In doing so my intention is to acknowledge and lament that 'Australia' is colonisers' term for what was, is and always will be the many lands—Country to the First People.

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