

# St. Margaret's Uniting Church Mooroolbark

Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> August, 2017

## First Peoples & the body of Christ

### REFLECTION ON FIRST PEOPLES AS SOVEREIGN

When Europeans arrived, we came with a number of things other than guns, diseases, and a penchant for land.

We arrived with a worldview that considered whites as the best extreme expression of civilisation; and highest in an evolutionary sense.

We also arrived with centuries of papal pronouncement that it was God's will to destroy heathens and acquire their land; or if possible to make them Christian.

This meant a number of things:

- An attitude of 'poor aborigines', to be pitied, or at best thought of as noble savages
- A belief that as inferior people they were destined to die out with superior people surviving in their place
- A blindness to Aboriginal Spirituality as having any God-given value, and usually seeing it as primal, heathen, destructive

In the time at the conference, *Honouring First Peoples as Sovereign*, I heard the ancient story of God through Aboriginal Spirituality or the dreamtime. We Second Peoples were confronted with the idea that Aboriginal law is unchanging because it comes from the creator; whereas White Peoples' law always changes.

There is much more to be said on this, but that is for another time.

In many ways, becoming Christian was a natural thing for Aboriginal people because of their deep Spiritual awareness. Waves of revival in places like Elcho Island and other parts of Arnhemland are testament to this.

Perhaps one of the biggest catastrophes in faith matters is how little we have learnt of the story of God from First Peoples; and conversely how we have demanded they reject their law, culture, language because it was seen as anti-Christian.

And the second big catastrophe in the name of Christ is the attitude that the non-Christian world is right to take, destroy, pillage in God's name. Again there is much that could be said of this but time is against us for now. This view from Popes and Colonists justifies the idea that we can take whatever we discover from the heathen world. Underlying this are tools like *Terra Nullius* and the *Doctrine of Discovery*.

Australia was not settled peaceably. The land was not empty. It was not discovered by Europeans in the last few hundred years. There was a war of resistance against the invaders.

These things may be surprising or even shocking, but history is always told by those most powerful. And the stories that you and I grew up with do not touch the truth of how our nation was formed.

In our time at the conference we were alerted to this other history that is typically not told. We also heard the pain and lament of our First Peoples. The history of land takeovers and dispossession, stolen generations and the like cannot be reversed, even in telling the truth of these things. But right now, the same thing continues to have a devastating impact on Aboriginal Australia.

Do you remember the Government Intervention in the Northern Territory? It began 10 years ago after a supposed crisis of domestic violence and alcohol abuse in Aboriginal communities. The government stepped in with the assistance of the army. *Once again our poor noble savages could not look after themselves and so the superior ones needed to step in.*

History repeats itself,  
has to,  
no-one listens. (Steve Turner)

The ideas that Whites brought to Australia devastated the Blacks. And those same attitudes were brought into the Intervention. It is no surprise that it is failing.

There is much to say about it, but in summary – children are forced to be educated in English, where previously it was bilingual. Imagine if you were forced to be taught in German or French! Aboriginal leaders told us, ‘our kids our now dumber’.

Governments like statistics. The statistics are damning of the Intervention. Before the Intervention there were about 250 Aboriginal juveniles in detention in the NT. Now there are over 900. That’s a massive difference over 10 years.

Our Indigenous brothers and sisters have asked us to be open to a new way. Treaty & self determination.

A treaty recognises that this land was not empty when Cook planted a flag in the name of the Empire. We are the only Commonwealth country to not have a treaty.

The other is the right to have Aboriginal people decide how to organise work, community, education.

We heard there was no appetite for a dual Australia/Apartheid. Rather the opposite. Aboriginal people want to be who they are – law/land/culture while having skills to negotiate the rest of Australia. Not long after the Uniting Church came into being, the government forced the church out of the Arnhemland missions. The Methodist history in the area was a good one, and my Yolngu friends want us back to work alongside one another.

This matters because history and the way it is told has power. The way we have heard the history of our nation has meant we have been blind to stories that continue to oppress those like the Canaanite woman. We

continue to be colonial in our attitudes and blind to our prejudice if we are unwilling to see and hear. And if we ignore that the church can oppress and justify treachery in the name of Christ, then that treachery will continue, and 'God weeps'.

*God waits for stones to melt,  
for peace to seed,  
for hearts to hold each other's need,  
and, till we understand the Christ, God waits.*

#### WHAT THEN CAN WE DO?

Be critical when you hear stories about Australian values;

Read/research the history that is not told – SBS series 'First Australians', book by Henry Reynolds, 'Why weren't we told?'

Suspend your judgement on Aboriginal people

There will be a study for congregations coming.

#### BLESSING and SENDING OUT

"Forgiveness comes sometimes in droplets, in bits and pieces"

Go out and be people of forgiveness and reconciliation,  
forgiveness that is a journey with Christ  
more than a single event of life.

God out and be people of forgiveness and reconciliation,  
a journey drop by drop, step by step  
with all whom Christ loves.

God out in forgiveness and reconciliation,  
seeking out truth as it is told,  
facing the dark for the sake of the light.

God out now with the blessing of God upon you ...