National Sorry Day

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Easter 6 C: Acts 16 9-15, Ps 67, Rev 21 10-14 22-25, Jn 14 23-29

God calls the most diverse strangers imaginable to become one Christian family.

The first National Sorry Day was held on May 26th, 1998. It was the first anniversary of the day when the *Bringing them Home* report was tabled in the federal parliament. This was a report which documented the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families; the children we now know as the 'Stolen Generations'.

It's called Sorry Day because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples use the word 'sorry' to say how we feel when we lose someone we love; usually when that person dies. So the expression 'Sorry Business' is used to describe the preparations and ceremonies associated with laying a loved one to rest.

National Sorry Day keeps us mindful of the sorrow of the Stolen Generations; the grief and loss experienced by the parents, families and communities cut off from their children who were forcibly removed; the sorrow of the Stolen Generations survivors themselves, cut off from family, community, country and culture.

Sorry Day is a call to all Australians to feel compassion – to find room and courage enough in our hearts to share the sorrow of loss and grief that so many Aboriginal people carry today – to remember our common humanity with these fellow children of Earth.

This call to oneness with Aboriginal Australians is

particularly incumbent on us as Christians. This is because God has offered the very same compassion to us. Our entire identity is founded on the compassion which God feels and shows for us. We see this most profoundly expressed in Jesus. He was born to become one of us; he died to destroy our separation from God; and he rose so that by the blessing of the Holy Spirit, we might be drawn with Jesus into oneness with each other and with God.

Today of all days, I'm struck by the fact that God's Son, Jesus, endured painful separation from his home community too. He came to us so that he might call us – people who didn't belong – foreigners – to call us to belong in his family. Jesus being born in Bethlehem is God becoming one of us – God's flesh-and-blood compassion for us – that we might come to belong with him.

This confronts us with a question. If we are followers of Jesus – imitators of Jesus –do we know what to do about this? That's where our scriptures today can come to our help. They don't present us with a ten-commandment-style workshop manual; rather they present us with stories of people who were able to hear God's call and overcome entrenched cultural fears and prejudices to follow that call.

One thing that strikes me particularly about today's readings is how multicultural and even multi-species they are. Look at the Psalm – let your ways be known upon Earth; liberating all nations; all the peoples judged with integrity (for once); all the ends of the Earth blessed. And Revelation also includes the nations in the final salvation – 'the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations'. *God calls the most diverse strangers imaginable to become one Christian family*.

We see the beginning of this multicultural emphasis in our first reading from Acts today. We arrive at the moment when Paul has been to Jerusalem and is now returning to all the places he'd been preaching before with some wonderful news to

tell them. The Apostles in Jerusalem had given him a letter for them; a letter which said that new Christians who had no Jewish backgrounds did not have to comply with Jewish religious laws the way Jewish Christians had done until then.

This was a totally new thing; something the Church had only just realised, because they learned from the stories Peter and Paul brought back to them that the Holy Spirit was incorporating people into the Church family who'd never heard of these rules; non-Jews – Gentiles. *God calls the most diverse strangers imaginable to become one Christian family*.

In today's reading from the book of Acts, we just heard how Paul was called to sail across to Macedonia – northern Greece – to bring even more culturally and religiously diverse people into the family of Christ – and not on the basis of common customs or culture, but simply because these people's hearts were open to be transformed by the Gospel of Jesus. And a detail we might not notice without a bit of prompting; the first church to be established on European soil was founded and headed by the woman we meet in this story – Lydia, the dealer in purple cloth.

We need to note this very carefully – God is coming to all people – just as we know happened in the coming of Jesus – and God doesn't demand that we fit a particular cultural or gender profile, nor that we comply with a set of religious rules – God is coming to where we are and inviting us to belong to the family. *God calls the most diverse strangers imaginable to become one Christian family*.

In these stories, we are given the pattern for our own style of relating to the world. God bridges divides, so that's the way we should act – we should seek to bridge divides. This is challenging. It's hard to connect with people whose personal circumstances confront us. Yet that's nothing to what God has done for us in coming as a helpless baby. Remember, we are with God who *calls the most diverse strangers imaginable to*

become one Christian family.

This brings me back to Sorry Day. Trying to turn black people into white people via cruel abductions and a crazed eugenic breeding programme – trying to force them to become us – is the absolute antithesis of the way we see God at work in today's scriptures. The Aboriginal People of Australia are us; these people are our family. These peoples' sorrow is our sorrow. Today is a day for us as children together; children of our loving, bridge-building God – today, let's re-commit to our solidarity with these dear ones still sorrowing for such a grievous wrong – *our* sisters and brothers. Real lives are blighted by an unimaginable separation which time cannot heal. God wants you and me to help build bridges. Amen.