

# Australia Day: We can be better than this

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Australia Day 2020

I wrote in my weekly that today we wouldn't use the readings set for Australia Day. They are scriptures which were used by the deeply religious Apartheid regime in South Africa to justify their exploitation of that land, and their treatment of its First Peoples. Such cruel irony is not appropriate to a worship service.

Tony Wilson replied to my weekly yesterday with a story. He wrote *'Years ago on the farm, one of my employees was a native, Herbie Lovatt. He was one of 'nature's gentlemen'. The white employees liked him, and our young children adored him. He was a returned soldier. I have [a copy of] a neatly hand-written letter of Herbie's, applying for a returned soldier's block of farm land. He was refused because he was black!'*

The readings we are using – those set for the third Sunday after Epiphany – are far better for a day as ambiguous as Australia Day. The readings from Isaiah and the Psalms are prophetic words of hope for the people of Israel. They were themselves a colonising people. They'd taken their land by force, but now they've been colonised and exiled themselves. Isaiah offers words of hope to this people who fear God has forgotten them, this people who live with the fear and shame of being controlled and exploited by foreigners. Isaiah's words also speak to us who carry the burden of our own colonial heritage. They call us to hear Aboriginal Australians with more compassion.

I often hear people say they find the Old Testament difficult; that it's so violent. But our story as colonisers of this land

is very much the same. Ours is a too-little told story of continent-wide, calculated mass murder, theft and cultural genocide.

And it still continues today both physically, and in its bureaucratic form. In August last year, the Queensland government extinguished native title to a part of the Galilee Basin so its traditional owners couldn't impede proposed mining developments there.

It's still happening; we are still taking the land, we are still disregarding its spiritual significance to its traditional owners, and we are still turning a deaf ear to demands for common justice.

This is why many First Australians are so desperately hurt by our celebration of the day when all this horror began for them. It's also why many First Australians read today's prophecies in Isaiah so differently from the newcomers. *The people who walked in darkness – on them, light has shined. ... For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken.* Imagine reading that literally; reading it as a promise that your people's undeserved suffering will end; that God will do justice.

What's our response? While I was away, I read some of Stan Grant's recent book, *Australia Day*. An Aboriginal Australian, Stan Grant starts by focussing on his time as an Australian journalist working overseas. From that perspective, he is able to share the pride and delight we all do in Australia's beauty, in our freedoms, and in the relaxed, friendly nature of our culture. An Australia Day barbeque is a lovely break from the tension of a journalist's overseas posting. So he knows how we feel about the wonderful things that bind us together; how rightly proud we are of the sort of humanity and compassion we've seen time and again – and most recently in people's compassionate response to the recent bushfire

disasters.

Yet when he's back in Australia, Stan Grant is deeply aware of First Australians being shut out of this beautiful community on a daily basis. He tries desperately to balance what there is to celebrate with what there is needing change.

So he reminds us of the 17-year mortality gap, reminds us how football crowds persecute Aboriginal players and commentators deny that it's racist behaviour; he reminds us that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults make up only 2% of the national population, yet constitute 27% of the national prison population; he reminds us that frequent Aboriginal deaths in custody continue; and he reminds us time and time again that *we are better than this*.

So our first job as Australian Christians is to make sure we can be *better than this*; that the Church offer leadership to the wider Australian community. And we've been offered a clear path to follow.

The National Constitutional Convention held at Uluru in 2017 gave Australia the *Statement from the Heart* so that we might have a way to be *better than this*. In its last paragraph, it says this. *In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard*. So listening is the first step.

In 2017, the Anglican Church of Australia responded to the *Statement from the Heart*. General Synod backed its call for a constitutionally-entrenched First Nations' Voice to the Commonwealth Parliament and asked that study resources be prepared in consultation with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Anglican Council. The result was a study book called *A Voice in the Wilderness*.

<https://www.abmission.org/resources.php/163/a-voice-in-the-wilderness> Last year, Vicky and I joined with a group of young parishioners to listen to this wonderful statement by using this book as a study guide. We'd welcome the opportunity to do so again this year with any of

you who may be interested.

The next step after listening is to allow ourselves to be changed – to repent and do things differently. In today's Gospel Jesus interpreted our reading from Isaiah in his own words. *The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.* He interpreted it like John the Baptist did before him; he called people to repent – to turn from our present life in the shadows and to follow him into the light. Next, we saw him put that straight into action; he called Simon, Andrew, James and John to drop what they were doing and follow him on that journey into the light. And they did.

Can the Church follow this call? The Uniting Church in Australia did so in 2009-10. It added a preamble to its constitution which affirmed something about Aboriginal Spirituality that, until then, every church had rejected.

Paragraph 3 of this preamble reads, *The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways.* In short, the Uniting Church repented of its former views, and acknowledged the truth of God's recognisable presence with Australian Aboriginal people since time immemorial.

Following Christ's call can be hard. We're asked to take risks, trust, and step into the unknown. Sometimes, we have to leave the familiar behind. Sometimes, our actions may make us look foolish. Following God may require us to admit and face our fears. Yet, we remember that we are all God's children; we are never alone.

So may God give us courage to bite this bullet, to trust and to offer leadership to Australia. Amen