

EPIPHANY 3

24TH JANUARY 2021

DAY OF MOURNING

2 Samuel 11. 27b- 12. 13a

Psalm 85

Mark 1. 14 - 20

Wise people know that grief and healing take time. As humans made in the image of God, when things are broken we need to do the reconciling work to put things aright in order for wholeness to be found. Grief and the effects of trauma are not just things over which you can wave a wand and spirit them away. Reconciliation, both personal and collective is long, slow work. Even the task of acknowledging that trauma has taken place it is a challenging first step. Witness how recalcitrant we were as a nation to finally say sorry to Australia's First Peoples in the parliament. Maybe we have begun to move as a nation, albeit slowly.

This week, as we have edged closer to Australia Day, there was the usual push and shove and posturing about how we should mark the day: whether we should mark it on the 26th January and who is allowed to speak about the issues festering around the date. It is an enormously encouraging step that Cricket Australia has chosen to remove the name Australia Day from the Big Bash League games – they did this after listening to indigenous people's wishes; not as some political stunt. The groundswell of people supporting the move to change the date in both concrete and symbolic ways is wonderful.

As the Prime Minister dissed the suffering of the indigenous people of Australia this week, discounting their suffering because 11 ships of convicts also arrived in Botany Bay on January 26th, it highlighted the fact the establishment of the nation-state of Australia was based upon violence. The violence which brought those 11 ships to Australia, the violence which began on that day which progressively displaced and exterminated the indigenous people of this land, the violence and injustice in too many places in the world which brought wave after wave of migrants here. Violence is behind too many of our stories of migration: the Highland Clearances in Scotland, the centuries-long violence against the Irish people, the violence of the breakdown of the Ottoman empire and the displacement of millions of Greeks and Turks, the violence of WWI and WWII which killed and displaced too many millions in Europe.

It is part of the human condition to want to forget trauma and suffering. Maybe Australia is the land of forgetting. But our forgetting leaks out. And it infects our children, our spouses, our wider families, our communities. No question it is part of the human condition to try and keep the lid on it; but it leaks out. The indigenous people are saying to the wider Australian community: we do not want to forget. Because if we insist on forgetting – even denying – then we are all incomplete because of it. And our attempts to celebrate the wonder of being Australian is based upon a lie. As Stand Grant says: the great Australian Dream built upon the backs of the aboriginal people. Their invitation to us to reconciliation dialogue and action is in truth a gracious gift to us. Nevertheless, it often involves a hard and sometimes shocking word which shatters our self-perception about having our hands clean.

The prophet Nathan is a wise man. He comes to kind David and tells him the story about the poor man with his one ewe lamb and the way in which it was wrested from him by the rich man and killed to impress his guest. David has a sense of justice which is provoked against the rich man; only for Nathan to point out that it is him. He has stolen Uriah's wife and had Uriah killed. And he points out that the violence which has characterized David's ascent to kingship will undermine and destroy his peace. The legacy of violence goes on.

The Uniting Church shares a covenant relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Congress. This is a relationship of mutuality which acknowledges that too many wrongs have been committed in the past and that much healing is needed. Our leaders, both from the Church and Congress, have been visionary and courageous in entering into this covenant. I am always surprised by the gracious and patient way in which indigenous people invite us to truth-telling and then wait for us to respond to their invitation to reconciliation. But their openness is so often painful for them, because we are too often unwilling, or simply deaf, to the depth of their pain and the extent of what they have lost. We are all complicit in this. Like David, we are the man.

The Uniting Church is offering the Australian nation a way to be with this reconciling work. It's not easy nor quick work, but it is work that can be and must be done if we are to share the unity to which we aspire – and which the government spin-doctors have been weaving these weeks since Christmas.

In the next couple of months, between now and Easter we will be considering how Ormond Uniting Church can take a stand on our relationship to the First People's of Australia and the task of reconciliation. What this might mean for Ormond UC. We will have an opportunity to hear stories of dispossession and trauma, and we will hear stories of hope and healing. We will be invited to reflect on how we might advance the cause and offer something to our wider community.

One of the affirmations of our church is walking together as First and Second peoples. I hope that this work we will do will enable us to undertake this walk of sister and brotherhood and that we might be people of Christ's reconciling love.

Andrew Boyle