

Lent 3

7th March 2021

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 1.18-25

John 2. 13-22

For our recent leave Chris and I spent two weeks in Tasmania. As we were preparing to go away a friend and colleague suggested I read a 2020-published book: *Truganini: journey through the apocalypse*, written by Cassandra Pybus. I bought the book with some hesitation, knowing I was delving into a difficult story, maybe one I honestly didn't want to know too much about. So as we journeyed around Tasmania we journeyed with Truganini; through the apocalypse.

The name Truganini has always conjured up for me a sense of pathetic tragedy. There was only one woman we know who bore this name, this infamous name. *Truganini: the last Tasmanian aborigine*, is how we have understood this woman. The sense I have carried of her is one of inevitability; what happened to her and her people was inevitable. She has in many senses been emblematic of the end of an era, the end of the Tasmanian aborigine. Tragic, but inevitable.

Truganini's country was Bruny Island, a long island south of Hobart comprising two large headlands joined by a long sand-spit. The connection between the author of this biography and Truganini is that Cassandra Pybus' ancestor was given a government land grant on Bruny Island in the 19th century. Her people had displaced Truganini's people from their country. So, this is a biography with 'flesh in the game' as they say. Pybus' story is tied to Truganini's story.

In the late 1820s, early 1830s the aboriginal people of Tasmania were under threat. There was genocidal conflict between their desire to continue to occupy their country and pastoral settlers with a government mandate to settle, occupy, clear and colonise Tasmania. The island was being civilised. The displacement of the "sub-human" aborigine, as they were defined, was an unfortunate by-product of this colonisation.

Between the first penal settlement in 1803 and the late 1840s Tasmania's native population was reduced to less than 50 full-blood aborigines. While Truganini lived until 1876 her people were decimated in these less-than 50 years by murder, disease, displacement, kidnapping and violence of all kinds. Somehow Truganini survives all of this, living into her 70s. I found she was a strong, resilient, capable and formidable woman. After reading this book, I see she is clearly not one to be pitied. All those settlers around her come out as self-serving, immoral and capricious.

The book has both informed me of the truth of her story and caused me to reflect on this sense of piteous inevitability that I have had of her.

The apostle Paul says to the Roman Christians in writing to them: *be transformed by the renewing of your minds*. Often our ways of viewing the world, our experience of the world, the problems we see as intractable for us are the result of our ways of thinking. We come to *believe* that some problem is intractable, some situation is inevitable because of the way we think about the world.

As I reflected on Truganini's story I recognised that I carried this story of inevitability about her people which I had been given. Usually photos or painting of her bore the title: *Truganini: the last Tasmanian aborigine*. I had taken this on board: yes, she was the last one.

But as I reflected, I realised that I had been infected with what some social scientists have called 'social Darwinism', that is, that Darwin's theory of evolution, which posits the idea of 'survival of the fittest', also applies to humans. The observation that Darwin made was that individual animals survived better because they were fitter, more resilient, stronger than others and the genetic profile of these individual animals prevailed. This theory – in order to develop fully the theory of evolution - was and is applied to whole species of animals and plants too. And it is not too big a leap to apply this to the human being and a convenient one to make if we want to justify our actions or mollify our consciences in the wake of what has taken place. The fittest ones survive.

I grew up with a sense that the aboriginal people of Tasmania were no more because they were swept away by the fitness of the European humans. Truganini was the last of them. But what has taken place in the last few decades is that many people have begun to identify themselves as indigenous Tasmanians. This has come as a surprise to many and an affront to others. But they all died out, we ask – under our breath or out loud? The reality I found in this book is that many young aboriginal women were raped by white settlers, bearing the children of that violence, while others were kidnapped by settlers, particularly whalers and sealers and they lived with these men and raised families with them. Many of those who identify now as aboriginal are the descendants of these unions.



As I read about Truganini I found some thoughts lurking in myself.

If the last full-blooded aboriginal died out, these people are no more I found lurking in the back of my mind. The longest continuous culture in the world. No more? I recalled times when I have found myself unsettled when someone claims Tasmanian aboriginal descent. But they're white the little voice says.

I had to ask myself: do I not say of myself that I carry some Irish and Scottish ancestry. Am I not proud of this ancestry? Do I not claim it for myself? Did I not feel connected to country when I visited the places my ancestors left more than 160 years ago? They are part of me; I am part of

them. So, I thought, how can we deny this of people who wish to claim their aboriginal identity – in spite of all the violence and ill-intent that was directed to them? While I found these thoughts lurking in myself I also recognise that this denial takes toxic form in many who discount the treatment of aboriginal history as the ‘black armband’ view of history. Dog-whistling politicians and social commentators.

Reflecting on this denial of aboriginality by some I recognised a mindset that holds genocide as an option, as a real possibility. Because when we look at someone with white skin who claims aboriginality and wish to deny their claim, at some level we are saying to them, you were wiped out, the aboriginal was bred out of you – look, you are no longer a black person, you cannot be aboriginal. I might call this the genocidal option, certainly an embrace of “survival of the fittest’. You were wiped out. You can’t claim aboriginality.

There is a prayer written for Holy Week by the Iona community which goes like this:

You know that only one who suffers
can ultimately save;
that is why you walk the way of the cross.
We fear that vulnerability
which defies our power;
that is why we allow for crucifixion.

Our willingness to make victims in order to privilege ourselves and secure our power always allows for crucifixion; real or metaphoric, bodily or of the spirit. And collectively this allowance for crucifixion runs to the readiness to exterminate another group, what we call genocide.

The notion of inevitability which the naming of Truganini as *the last aborigine* absolves us of culpability in the genocide of aboriginal nations of this land, absolves us of the healing work that is required, absolves us of the re-thinking and reorienting which comes from this, absolves us of renewal and transformation. And we became less than human while we continue to allow for crucifixion, indeed it makes us inhuman if we want to claim this ‘inevitability’ option for ourselves.

This thinking sent Jesus to the cross. In the cross we are invited to rethink ourselves and our world – it is a stumbling block and a scandal in the way it confronts us but in contemplating it and taking in its power we may be transformed and renewed and made whole by the one who gave himself that we might understand these things.

So as we continue our way through Lent with a spirit of penitence about our country’s past we pray for ourselves, we pray for our country - knowing that too many bear deep pain, generations-deep pain – we pray for the work of reconciliation that we all have to do, we pray for our world that the persecution in all its forms may stop, that we may be remade in the image of the crucified and risen one and delight in his foolishness for us.

Andrew Boyle