

Esther 7. 1-6, 9-10, 9. 20-22

Mark 9. 38-50

One fine warm day in 1966 I found myself wandering around the base of Uluru , or Ayers Rock as we called it then. My Teachers' College friends were all climbing the monolith and I had felt a bit of a wimp by bailing out of the climb, partly because my over cautious mum had implored me not to and from my own sense of unease, or funk. That day has come to be among the most utterly awe-inspiring experiences of my life.

As I scuffed through the red sand, all alone, I was filled with a sense of wonder. I could not put it into words and I did not discuss it with any of my fellow travelers.

There was a sense of the Other all around me. I could hear it whisper on the breeze, I could feel it in the radiating warmth, I could touch it in the solidity of rock. It was beyond me in the vastness of the land and it seemed within me, as intimate as my own breathing. It was a presence.

I was awe struck. It was indeed holy ground.

I am so glad I did not climb the Rock that day, partly because I now understand how offensive that is to the Anangu First Peoples and also because I had that depth of experience which I think helps me to understand at least the rudiments of Indigenous, Aboriginal, First People's Spirituality.

A Yorta Yorta woman Hyllis Maris who lived between 1934 and 1986 wrote of it thus:

I am a child of the Dreamtime People  
Part of the land like the gnarled gum tree.  
I am the river, softly singing  
Chanting our songs on my way to the sea.  
My spirit is dust devils  
Mirages, that dance on the plain  
I'm snow, the wind and the falling rain.  
I'm part of the rocks and the red desert earth  
Red as the blood that flows in my veins.  
I am eagle, crow and snake that glides  
Through the rain -forest that clings to the mountain side.  
I awakened here when the earth was new.  
There was emu, wombat, kangaroo.  
No other man of a different hue

I am this land  
I am Australia.

We can see in her expression the overlay of white education as she makes the rhyming patterns of European poetry. What she expresses is the interrelationship she has with the land, with Country. It is her oneness with everything. She does not just belong to the land but she is part of its very self. It is part of her.

This is part of the essence of Indigenous spirituality, that one's being is embedded in belonging both to kin and country. This is manifested in the ways in which the people are interrelated with the animals, the plants, the terrain, rocks, earth, rivers, sea and sky. My experience that day at Uluru did not grant me that sense of belonging but it did give me an entrance into some understanding of how it might be for First Peoples.

I experienced it again when we lived in WA, not quite as strongly, but the Presence was there. As part of my studies through Murdoch University I had to explore my local area, understanding something of its geology, flora and fauna and history. As I wandered along the salt flats and near the mangroves alone with my camera and in the oppressive heat, I had a small sense of what it might mean to belong to that place. The place was quite alien to what I was used to, the much softer hills of the Dandenongs and the beaches of Port Philip Bay.

Although I was not far from habitation there was a profound sense of being alone in the vastness and yet somehow surrounded by some sense of presence of, I know not quite what.

No way could I have found water to drink nor recognize the plants that would sustain life nor be able to kill a kangaroo for food. And if our family's lack of fishing prowess were anything to go by, we would not have been able to live on fish.

With hindsight and developing knowledge I had also a sense of emptiness, a vacancy on that day. The Original Peoples no longer lived there. Iron Ore and Natural Gas companies had followed on from pastoralists in utilizing and exploiting the land. The First Peoples who had lived there had not survived this, only their art, stenciled on rock walls remained and that fortunately was kept hidden by the few people sensitively aware of the rich legacy.

If the Spirits of the original people from the past were there still, they remained hidden. These past people, the old ones, are part of the kinship that is integral to Indigenous spirituality. It is about knowing who your mob is, to whom you belong, from whom you descended, both human and Dreaming Creator creatures. It is to these spirits that Indigenous people return upon their death and then later reappear as another part of the Creation.

Perhaps the spirits were hidden, watching on in the Karratha Court House when several policemen were on trial for the murder of Aboriginal man, John Pat, kicked and beaten to death while in custody. Did the Old People spirits mutter in abject horror when the police were acquitted?

Did these spirit people come on the bus excursion with bush children soon to enroll in the town secondary school? As part of the excursion the kids were taken inside the Dickensian Old Roebourne jail, complete with its shackles on the walls, to see what happens to youths who run foul of the law, laws they often have little hope of being able to keep?

Or did the spirits laugh and swim in the waterhole with the other kids, the carefree ones who chose not to go to school?

Did they congregate at the Victoria Pub on Friday nights, seeing their cousins from other areas drinking and fighting until they too were locked up in the jail yard?

Western people usually scoff at the idea of ghosts but many other cultures have a rich resonance with the people from their pasts. A Melbourne clergyman Rev Gary Deverell who identifies as a Trawloolway man, descended from the Aboriginal peoples of Northern Tasmania, speaks of his experience of hearing the voices and understanding the language of his forbears. He experienced them dancing, chanting and singing as he approached a particular beach in Tasmania. He saw them on the beach with their dark skin, animal robes and ochre paint, but when his contemporary walking companions caught up with him, these ancestors vanished. They had been a real experience to Gary and he came to understand them as having come to encourage him on his exploration of his Indigenous heritage.

You might want to dismiss this as a flight of fancy, but Gary sees this experience as being a part of the Dreaming, the lore of his people's history and spirituality, their relationship with the whole environment and with their rich past that connects them to the land and to each other.

The Dreaming has past, present and future dimensions. It is everywhere and always present in everything all around. While it holds the mythological stories of the First Peoples it also sustains them, like the air we breathe or the water that fish swim in. It is kept in the People's awareness by their Storytelling. The Dreaming is told in song, in dance, in repeated story, in initiations and rituals, in art on cave walls.

And is not this the way it is for us and our spirituality, our faith? We tell the story of Jesus and the story of God's people, over and over, through our rituals, through painting and sculpture, through our songs and in some places even through dance and movement. In Jewish faith the celebration of Purim commemorates the way the brave and clever Esther saved her minority people from extermination in the Persian kingdom.

We even have some sense of connection beyond earthly life. We embrace the Holy Spirit as being the presence of the Risen Jesus with us 2000 years after his death. It should not be

difficult for us to appreciate the ways of Indigenous spirituality with its Dreaming that explains Creation.

Just as there are different branches of Christianity and Islam and Judaism, the Australian First people's spirituality has some variations. There were some 250 Aboriginal nations when colonization began in 1788. Being spread across such a vast land it is natural that their Creation stories, their Dreaming, will have differences according to the landscapes and the animals present.

There are similar but varied threads running through the belief systems. The Creator Spirit was often called Baiame the sky father for such peoples as the Wonnarua, Kamilaroi, Eora and Wiradjuri.

Some Tasmanian First People relate to Moinee who made people from dirt and modelled them on Tarneer, the kangaroo -creator.

Other peoples, such as the Kulin, claimed Bunjil who created people by breathing into the clay figures he moulded. Does this not have a familiar ring to us as God breathed into the figure of Adam, made from the dust?

Other spirit ancestors include the Crow Waa, a trickster figure.

Some Peoples like the Yanyuwa speak of how the spirits of the dead are often attacked by crows who are angry at being chased away from camp sites. The spirits are saved by hawks and falcons. There are many, many stories which explain aspects of life descended from the Dreaming.

With colonization many First peoples were banned from speaking their language or practicing their rituals. Many were driven from the land which held their Dreaming and was so intricately connected with their being. Language was lost and children grew up without knowing the richness of their heritage or initiation rites and they grew up dislocated from all that was important to them ... their kin, their Dreaming and their land. And as these Peoples were barred from their land so the land was denigrated, exploited, swamps drained, rivers polluted, seas overfished, reefs bleached, plains overgrazed by introduced animal, many of which have become feral, forests razed, land features blasted to expose the mineral wealth the colonizers so coveted.

It is safe to say that very little of the ways of the Old People remains intact. Only in pockets, way beyond our cities is the affinity with the land still regarded as part of the very fabric of being. Missionaries, our forbears, made sure so much was taken from the First peoples, even their own names not to mention their ways and beliefs. This can be compared with the genocide that so threatened Esther's people as Haman plotted to exterminate the Jews. Genocide is a very ugly word but this is what we Second Peoples must own.

Yes, we can see that some missionaries were genuinely wanting to obey the command to make disciples, to bring Christ's ways to these people whom they regarded as ignorant savages. However, all too often this went hand in glove with paternalistic government policies which were bent on seeing the First peoples disappear, die out. This was coupled with avaricious business models that rode rough shod over the people's lifestyle, eliminating their food sources as well as desecrating their sacred spaces. Little time or effort was spent in learning the ways and understanding the beliefs of the First Peoples. This was never entertained, that the First Peoples were neither ignorant nor savage, but had their own complex system of beliefs and ways, ways that honoured the land and did not exploit it because it was their Mother. Even today a mining company can destroy a sacred space and little is done to remediate it. Nothing can bring back what has been so comprehensively destroyed.

Can we draw some reparation from Jesus' remark in Mark's Gospel, 'Whoever is not against us is for us'? Even recognising that I take this out of its context, might it be a word of healing in the reconciliation process that many Australians believe is necessary if we are to go ahead as a nation of First and Second Peoples together? The disciples were affronted at anyone not of their group being able to do the work, be at Jesus' mission. Yet Jesus was not at all bothered by these interlopers.

Many Australians from all backgrounds hunger for reconciliation, for a new Creation to occur in our land.

But we have to ask ourselves why? If it is so Second Peoples can feel better about the past that was inflicted upon the Aboriginal Peoples and have the guilt of this corporate past expunged, then the First Peoples will see little benefit in it. Why would they?

In Jesus' words, that anyone who is not against us is for us, we can read a breadth that goes way beyond sectarianism, perhaps beyond Christianity itself. We know that there is goodness in faith systems and that also all can be applied abusively. There will need to be acknowledgment that much of what happened in colonization was certainly not done in love.

Probably it is impossible for First Peoples to return to the state that they lived in before 1788. So much has been lost. Many First Peoples have embraced Christianity. Many now live lives similar to the Second comers. Many have embraced western education. Yet many of these people still feel a strong connection with their Dreaming ancestry, whatever their skin colour. In order to be reconciled with each other Second Peoples, us, will have much work to do in listening to how the First Peoples imagine our future together.

We will need to listen in our church structures, in our ways of government across the land, in our health systems, in education, and how both children and older people can learn and in the justice system. We will need to listen with respect and humility and we will not be able to wave away the wrongs of the past.

We will need to see through different eyes: to see where the land is integrated into the very fabric of being. We will need to see the night sky and identify a dark emu in the Milky Way. We will need to feel the pain of the land where it has been ravaged. We will need to really be sorry for the way First Peoples have been treated.

Perhaps if we heed Jesus' words of being together in the same sense of mission, we will reach reconciliation. We will find satisfactory ways of recompense. We will not impose European values and ways that too often stem from our greed and our arrogance but we will appreciate that there may be a different way, a better way for the Earth and her family. We may be able to acknowledge or even be upon the sacred places like Uluru and be aware of the Other, the One whom we name God, the One who personifies Love and perhaps then we will be healed.

This is my prayer .