

Day of Mourning

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 20 January 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Raymond Joso

Epiphany 2C

Psalm 36: 5-10; Song: *Justice Will Be Done* by Johnny Huckle; Luke 19: 1-10

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Gatherings” tab

Let me begin the same way as our Resurrected Christ greeted his disciples, “Peace be with you”

Good morning,

I also would like to acknowledge the Chairperson of the UAICC (Diane Torrens) present with us. Thank you Auntie Di for being with us today. I know it’s a long journey – a long travel, but we are so grateful that you can be with us.

Today, as the liturgy expresses itself, we remember together the tragic truth of our history, acknowledging the wrongs of the past and current impacts of colonisation and dispossession of Australia’s First Peoples.

I believe it was the right move that the Uniting Church, at the fifteenth Assembly, endorsed today as a day where we lament and mourn of the dispossession and violence against First Peoples. With this in my heart, I am challenged today in front of you, as a member of the Uniting Church, as followers of Jesus in this land, with the question on how we might be good news in our world in ways that bring about a more just Australia, especially to our First brothers and sisters.

If we were to identify just one area of Australia’s life that was in need of God’s transformative hope, the situation of broken relationship between non-indigenous and Indigenous Australians would be that one. Indigenous communities, both remote and urban, experience heightened levels of disadvantage across all socio-economic indicators. Indigenous Australians have worse health and education outcomes across the board than the non-indigenous population.

There was research done by the Australian Medical Association that an indigenous child born has a life expectancy of 11.5 years less than a non-indigenous child. It is sadly reported that this is linked to the effects of racism on people’s lives, unchecked intergenerational poverty and reduced access to basic services that other Australians take for granted.

I am highlighting you this, not to make you feel ashamed or guilty. I am highlighting this so that together we can open our eyes and reject this appalling situation, which comes from the legacy of our colonial past and the flawed, abusive, and paternalistic policies that have contributed to the breakdown of indigenous families and communities. Indigenous people suffer from both a lack of respect and lack of basic human rights in this country. Too many are marginalised, sick and living in dire poverty.

The contemporary song by Johnny Huckle that we sang in our liturgy, “Justice will be done”, is a very appropriate song for today. There is a hopeful wisdom that I captured in the verse on how we can move forward with a shared future, when it says:

There’s a common good for all to share
peace within our hearts that binds us together
we can rise above human weaknesses within us all
we require love to heed the call
for justice to be done.

The Uniting Church affirmed the same call “for justice to be done”, and that call does not stop at just acknowledging the wrongs of the past and saying sorry and asking for forgiveness. But creating a safe community where people can come together, sit and talk, and experience healing and forgiveness for the past, and finding a new destiny together. Hence when we speak about justice, that justice needs to be holistic and restorative. It cannot be just about achieving fairness, and certainly not about vengeance, retribution or punishment. It doesn’t start with me blaming you or you blaming me. In fact, no one is to be blamed. Actually we are all to be blamed.

Restorative justice actually encompasses the practice of justice-making in which the relationships of people and communities are integral to ‘making things right’. If you’ve been in the Uniting Church long enough, and you are waiting for a definition of “restorative justice”, I will disappoint you right now. I don’t have one! There is no consensus in the definition of restorative justice, but certainly it can be understood in terms of repentance, restitution, reparation and reconciliation.

But the most important thing we need to realise is that it is a continuing process of healing of breaches, redressing the imbalances. A continuing process of restoring broken relationships and committing to walk together as First and Second Peoples finding a new destiny together. With this, I believe that we are committing ourselves to take action to bring about a more just Australia.

An example of this can be seen from the gospel reading today when Jesus’ interacts with Zacchaeus at Jericho (Luke 19:1-10). With the tax collector, Zacchaeus.

Jesus doesn’t belittle or punish Zacchaeus; instead, Jesus insists on going to his home, shares a meal, listen to his story and treats him like a friend. Zacchaeus’ heart is opened and transformed and went through a process of repentance, reparation and reconciliation. He said to the Lord, that *“if I have defrauded anyone or anything, I will pay back four times as much”*.

You see, it is in this kind of response that we can see that Jesus’ action of justice is restorative. It’s not a blaming game. It’s not about achieving fairness. It’s not about vengeance, retribution or punishment.

It was successful because Jesus starts by loving Zacchaeus. Loving Zacchaeus in his original and total identity! And that love transforms Zacchaeus’ heart. Jesus is actually taking a love stance of wins by making sure Zacchaeus, the victim, and the community all win. It’s a love that demands ‘embrace’ not ‘exclusion’, which then enabled Zacchaeus to reconnect again, restoring that relationship back to the community, bringing reconciliation to the whole community – finding a new destiny together.

So how do we take this wisdom from Jesus and Zacchaeus' story, the wisdom of restorative justice and take a significant step towards healing for our nation?

When I was in Africa for two years, I observed and studied closely about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Without getting too extensive (and you probably know more than me about it), I actually learnt that the process really does satisfy the dual requirements of restorative justice and truth because it is able to bring terrible deeds to light. Not necessarily in a context of retribution, but it has an element of embrace, an element of restoration that breaks into situations of oppression in order to put right what is wrong and restore relationships to their proper place.

It all begins with relationships! It all begins with listening! Yes, the willingness to listen and trying to restore the relationship that has been broken. It is very hard. But it is exactly on these two elements (which have been lost in our contemporary western Australian society) that reconciliation can actually emerge.

Every time I sit, talk, and listen to our sisters and brothers from UAICC, Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, I hear joy from them - and at the same time can hear grievance coming out that runs very deep.

For example, the issue of Land. Land is very sacred and important for them. Let's not forget that if we believe in the Creator God, the Spirit was already in this land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. They don't need our conversion, they were already on the way to the same love and grace that was finally revealed in Jesus Christ. They are already on the way.

Now let's own up, we do live on stolen land. We took the land without payment, treaty or negotiation. I know we cannot go back 229 years ago, but I know that we cannot put the history away. So, the challenge for us all, Pitt St Uniting Church, is how do we build a society that recognises theft and

- (i) seeks some form of reparation,
- (ii) seeks ways for people to fulfil their custodial obligations to land,
- (iii) allows Second Peoples to live here with some security, but
- (iv) does not put the interests of large corporations like mining companies before the needs and survival of the people and the earth?

This might seem to be a big of task for all of us, but the good place to start, where we begin in this, is to check out the Preamble to the Uniting Church's Constitution. (Has anyone read the Preamble? We can print this out later in the afternoon. How about that!) Because the Preamble to the Uniting Church Constitution, I know, gives a succinct statement of our histories in this country both as Australians and as the people of God.

Remembering our history is an important part of our journey toward reconciliation - as First and Second Peoples. In the Preamble, the Uniting Church has already determined that a significant priority for its life during the next triennium is to explore with Congress what it would mean for the practices of the Church to recognise and affirm that First Peoples are sovereign Peoples.

Sovereignty is about honouring those who were here first, and starting to negotiate a new way for us to live together in this land. This is our covenant. Let's join together with the rest of our brothers and sisters in the Uniting Church in this covenant. Let's not be silent.

In fact, in the Preamble, there is an acknowledgement that we, the uniting churches, were largely silent as the dominant culture of Australia constructed and propagated a distorted version of history that denied this land was occupied by First Peoples. As a result of this denial, relationships were broken and the very integrity of the Gospel proclaimed by the churches was diminished.

So let's not be silent.

Let's raise this important covenantal relationship. Let's accept the invitation from Jesus calling us into the light of reconciliation. Let's ensure that resources are given to the area of health, housing, education, employment and welfare support for our First brothers and sisters. Yet more than that, let's champion policies which respect self-determination and the ability and desire of Indigenous people to themselves address disadvantage without the imposition of solutions by outside welfare and government bodies.

I truly think, accompanied by a restorative justice practices which develop non-indigenous capacity to be respectful and engage with indigenous culture and peoples, will lead to better community here in Australia.

So let's go from here to live out the covenant into which we, the First and Second Peoples of this land, have entered with one another.

Confront and challenge injustice wherever you see it. Act justly yourselves and insist that others do the same. Rejoice in the richness of our diverse cultures and learn from them.

Celebrate and demonstrate the unity we share in Jesus our Lord.

Commit to worship, witness and serve as one people under God, until God's promised reconciliation of all creation is complete.

Amen