

A Sermon
'Aboriginal Sunday'
The Sunday before Australia Day
The Most Reverend Kanishka Raffel
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St Andrew's Cathedral Sydney

In the late 1930s, William Cooper, an Aboriginal Christian leader and Yorta Yorta man, called on the national churches to set aside the Sunday before Australia Day to pray for the spread of the gospel among his people and the improvement of their social conditions and welfare. Today, many churches across Australia are answering that call.

Although William Cooper died in 1944, his story has attracted attention in Australia more recently following international recognition for his protest of the Nazi pogrom against the Jewish people in Germany that took place on what is now known as Kristallnacht – the Night of Broken Glass, 9 Nov 1938. Hearing of this terrible event, and inspired by the stories of the Exodus and God's promises to rescue his people Israel, Cooper organised a protest march of just a dozen or so of his fellow Aboriginal countrymen from Fitzroy where he lived to the Reichs Embassy in Collins Street in Melbourne. When they arrived, the Ambassador refused to meet them or to accept their letter of protest but the event was covered by the Melbourne newspaper, *The Argus*.

In 2010, in recognition of William Cooper's activism in defence of the Jewish people, the Israeli National Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem established a Professorial Chair in Resistance Studies in his honour. They describe Cooper's protest in Melbourne in 1938 as the only citizens' protest in the weeks after Kristallnacht, anywhere in the world. More than 60 years after his death, Yad Vashem hosted a dinner in honour of William Cooper attended by 12 members of his family, along with Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd and Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu.

What is perhaps most astonishing about this story of a truly remarkable Australian Aboriginal Christian leader is that until now, my guess is, almost no one here has heard this story before.

William Cooper led his protest against the Nazi's treatment of the Jews in December 1938. In January of that same year, 1938, as Australia prepared to celebrate the sesquicentenary of British settlement, Cooper - who was Secretary of the Australian Aborigines League - along with the Aborigines Progressive Association, arranged a Day of Mourning on January 26 which was held at Australia Hall in Elizabeth Street, Sydney. It was the first time Aboriginal people gathered from around Australia to advocate for the welfare of their own people. This followed on from the Australian Government's rejection of a petition drafted by Cooper and addressed to the King, seeking among other things, Aboriginal representation in the Federal Parliament.

At roughly the same time, Cooper called on the churches of Australia to mark what he called 'Aborigines Sunday' on the Sunday before Australia Day. He was supported by John Stafford

Needham, Honorary Canon of this Cathedral, whose plaque (on the northern wall) describes him as 'Priest, Missionary, and Friend to the Aborigines',

In calling on the churches of Australia to mark the Sunday before Australia Day in this way, Cooper said: "We request that sermons be preached on this day dealing with the Aboriginal people and their need of the gospel and response to it and we ask that special prayer be invoked for all missionary and other effort for the uplift of the dark people."

His language reflects the idiom of the time, but in recent years, there have been renewed calls including by people like Aunty Jean Philips calling for prayer and action on behalf of First Nations people. Aunty Jean has spoken of the history of her people in this Cathedral, history of which most of us are mostly unaware. Her consistent themes are that we need to know the history of our own country; we need to meet at the foot of the cross as we give expression to the reconciliation that Christ has won for us; we need to approach all of these questions with deep prayerfulness. A dozen years ago, Aunty Jean initiated the national prayer movement known as *#Change the Heart*, in which the Cathedral has participated over recent years.

So as we prepare to celebrate Australia Day on Thursday, and to thank God for the beauty and bounty of this country, we want today to pause to acknowledge and lament the unhappy and devastating impact of European settlement on the lives of countless numbers of First Nations people, and also to thank God for the courage and faith and survival of the first Australians, so many of whom are our Christian brothers and sisters, who offer to us an invitation to walk together in humility and hope, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Genesis chapter 4 tells the story of the first murder. Eve's first born son, Cain murders his brother, Abel. The Lord inquires of Cain as to Abel's whereabouts, to which Cain replies – notoriously – 'Am I my brother's keeper?' Of course, Cain condemns himself since God does indeed intend that we should honour one another as fellow creatures made in God's image.

The Lord responds in these rather startling words in Genesis 4:10
'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.'

I selected this reading because it was the text preached on by CMS missionary Rob Haynes at a Chapel service at Moore College when I was student. At the time Rob and Leanna were serving with CMS at Nungyalingya Bible College in Darwin, the 'combined churches training college for Indigenous Australians'. Rob told us that his students read this verse and couldn't go on with the class. They had to stop. Because it spoke to them so powerfully of their own experience and history. They felt that God knew all about them because he hears the voice of blood shed in violence and betrayal.

My family migrated to this country fifty years ago. For me and countless thousands of migrants like me, Australia has been a land of blessing and opportunity. And yet, as we give thanks to God for Australia, we must acknowledge too, that for so many of those who are descended from the first inhabitants of this country, their lives are marked by discrimination, injustice and suffering.

Captain Cook recorded in his own journal on 29 April 1770, that when preparing to land at what is now Kurnell in Botany Bay, they first sighted people on the shore and he opened fire to scare them off. But he only provoked them, so that he subsequently fired two more shots, injuring one of the men before they withdrew. The very first contact between the British settlers and the original inhabitants of this land, even before Cook and his party had landed on shore, was one of violence.

When William Cooper drafted his petition to the King in 1935 seeking representation in Federal Parliament, he drew attention to the fact that when Arthur Phillip returned to Sydney in 1788, he had explicit instructions to care for the original inhabitants: Cooper wrote

“... it was not only a moral duty, but also a strict injunction included in the commission issued to those who came to people Australia that the original occupants and we, their heirs and successors, should be adequately cared for ...”

In fact, as early as 1790, Governor Phillip’s convict gamekeeper shot some Aboriginal men, and was non-fatally speared in retaliation for the shooting. Governor Phillip then ordered a retaliation demanding the detention of two Aboriginal men and the execution of ten men. The retaliation party including Lieutenants Watkin Tench and William Dawes were issued with axes and sacks to bring back the heads of those they killed.

Dawes and Tench were both Christians and expressed their reluctance to comply. For this insubordination, Dawes was sacked by Governor Phillip and sent back to England. Tench argued with Phillip and the mission was reduced to killing two men rather than ten. Tench returned empty-handed saying he had not been able to find anyone. But Governor Phillip’s decision to retaliate established a principle of violence and mass killing that lasted for 150 years. According to historian John Harris, by the 1830s, ‘frontier violence around NSW had become so widespread that the murder of Aboriginal people by British colonial stockmen, settlers and convicts was generally accepted, despite British law clearly articulating that it was a crime punishable by death.’

Of course, more Aboriginal people died from disease in the early days of the colony than from mass killings. In 1789 a small pox epidemic broke out in the colony. Most Europeans had an immunity to it having been exposed previously, but it is estimated that up to 70% of the Aboriginal population succumbed to the disease.

I mention these realities of our history not because no good came from British settlement. On the contrary, we all continue to benefit from the courage and enterprise of the first settlers. I mention these facts first because they are so little known, and second, because they relate to events within a few months of British Settlement in Sydney. Unless we are informed about what happened in the earliest days of the colony, we won’t have insight as to why the day that we celebrate as our national day, the day that commemorates Arthur Phillip’s landing at Port Jackson, is regarded by First Nations people as a day of mourning, and why as early as 1938, William Cooper and other Aboriginal people called for it to be observed as a Day of Mourning. The least we owe them is being informed.

Of course, the trajectory of the history of First Nations people in our country remained chequered. We rejoice in the survival and stunning achievement of so many Indigenous Australians across many fields of endeavour in ways which are a blessing not only to their own people but to all Australians. And yet, we know all too well that the descendants of those who first suffered dispossession from their lands experience, on average, worse educational and health outcomes than non-Indigenous Australians, are incarcerated in what the Statement from the Heart rightly calls obscene numbers and many, many live with the intergenerational trauma of the Stolen Generations – people taken from their parents as children and losing contact with entire networks of kith and kin, of language and history and storylines. These are not only tragic realities for First Nations people, they are a tragedy for all Australians. To say so, is not to embrace guilt for the sins of others, it is to acknowledge the pain in our midst and its continuing impact in the lives of our fellow countrymen.

The next time the Scriptures make reference to the blood of Abel, it is from the lips of Jesus. As he pronounces his 'woes' or judgements on the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law in Matthew 23 he says to them:
you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets... upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation.
(v31-36)

Somewhat surprisingly, Jesus teaches that those who oppose him in his day will be held accountable for the murder of the prophets who preceded him, who were killed by their ancestors. So, at least, we must not be too hasty to assure ourselves that we are utterly free of the sins of others in times past. Jesus speaks of intergenerational responsibility for some sins, and the bible speaks of the intergenerational impact of some sins.

The Anglican Church of Australia is a prime beneficiary of the dispossession of the First Nations peoples. We continue to benefit from our use of these lands including the land on which this Cathedral stands. For that reason alone I believe it is right for us to be committed to what is sometime called truth telling – by which is meant, I take it, that we learn the Aboriginal history Australia as well as the other two great strands of Australian history, as Noel Pearson has described them – the history of British settlement, and the history of migration. 'I am, you are, we are Australian', but we have not always heard with courage and compassion all the stories Australia has to tell. Last year's Synod resolved to request every parish to identify and recognise the Indigenous history of the place where they are situated, to reach out to any Indigenous community in that location and to partner with Sydney Anglican Indigenous ministries across the Diocese – in Glebe and Redfern, Mt Druitt, MacArthur and Shoalhaven.

The final place that we find a reference in Scripture to the blood of Abel is in the Letter to the Hebrews. Throughout the letter, the writer draws a contrast between the old covenant and the new, which has come in Jesus. Jesus is superior to the angels and superior to Moses. He is a great high priest better than the priesthood of Levi, and he offers a better sacrifice than the blood of bulls and goats. He is the Son of God, our sympathetic Great High Priest, the one true sacrifice and the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. The refrain of the Letter to

the Hebrews is – fix your eyes on Jesus. And in chapter 12 the comparison comes to a crescendo as the writer contrasts the experience of terror when Moses stood before the Lord at Mt Sinai, and the experience of grace for those who have come, by faith, ‘to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the assembly of the firstborn....to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.’ (Hebrews 12:22-24)

The blood of Abel called out from the ground for justice, for the Lord’s vengeance on murder and bloodshed; but the blood of Jesus speaks a better word. The blood of Jesus speaks a word of forgiveness, of the penalty paid, of sins washed away, of reconciliation between people and God and between people, through the blood of Jesus.

Because the death of Jesus reconciles us to God, those who have faith in Christ are reconciled to each other. Our relationship with one another is not under the shadow of guilt, but in the freedom of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. The apostle Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 2:

Jesus himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility... His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross..(Ephesians 2:14-16)

Michael Duckett, pastor of MacArthur Indigenous Church and Chair of our Sydney Anglican Indigenous Peoples Ministry Committee, said at the Synod last year, ‘Christ reconciles us to each other, now we have to live it out.’ Aunty Jean uses the refrain, ‘we need to come together at the foot of the Cross.’

Because the death of Jesus pays the penalty for our sin, for the sin of the world, for the sin of black and white Australians in history and today, we can face the future, and we can face each other, without shame or guilt or fear. We do not need to fear telling the truth of our history because Jesus, who is the light that exposes sin, is also the blood that atones, the sacrifice that bears the punishment and the balm that brings healing.

The blood of Jesus speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. The blood of Jesus makes repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation possible.

Let me quote from another Indigenous Christian leader and brother, and BCA’s National Indigenous Officer, Neville Naden who said this at the BCA Centenary service held here at St Andrew’s Cathedral on Sorry Day, 26 May 2019:

“There have been a lot of things that have been done in the name of the church that have been ungodly. That goes without saying. But the wonderful thing the church did was to introduce the gospel to this country. A gospel that brings hope where there is no hope. A gospel that brings life where there is no life. Those on the fringes of society are brought into the inner circle of God’s family.”

The blood of Abel speaks of sin and murder and punishment.
The blood of Jesus speaks of atonement, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Later this year, the Australian people will be asked in a referendum whether they support a constitutionally enshrined indigenous Voice to Parliament. In response to a question about what we should think about the Voice to Parliament – Auntie Jean replied – ‘We must pray!’ I hope you will.

Our Synod last year resolved to learn about the Voice and to encourage Sydney Anglicans to give generous consideration to voting yes. It is not the Synod’s business to tell people how to vote, nor is it the business of Archbishops. The Synod resolution committed us to learning and listening, to reflecting and to giving generous consideration to the proposals that will be put before us. A good way to start that would be to read our Sydney Anglican Doctrine Commission paper on A Theological Framework for Reconciliation with Special Reference to the Indigenous Peoples of Australia, which you can find on the diocesan website. I’ll ask Sandy to send you a link.

For Christians, reconciliation is achieved at the Cross – the Lord who makes us at peace says to his disciples, Love one another as I have loved you.

I’d like to close with the Reconciliation prayer that was written by *Wontulp-Bi-Buya Indigenous Theology Working Group in 1997*

Let us pray

Holy Father, God of Love,

You are the Creator of this land and of all good things.

We acknowledge the pain and shame of our history
and the suffering of our peoples,
and we ask your forgiveness.

We thank you for the survival of indigenous cultures.

Our hope is in you because you gave your Son Jesus
to reconcile the world to you.

We pray for your strength and grace to forgive,
accept and love one another,
as you love us and forgive and accept us
in the sacrifice of your Son.

Give us the courage to accept the realities of our history
so that we may build a better future for our nation.

Teach us to respect all cultures.

Teach us to care for our land and waters.

Help us to share justly the resources of this land.

Help us to bring about spiritual and social change
to improve the quality of life for all groups in our communities,
especially the disadvantaged.

Help young people to find true dignity and self-esteem by your Spirit.

May your power and love be the foundations
on which we build our families, our communities and our nation,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.