

Are these the stories we want to hear? Are these the stories we need to hear?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 11 July, 2021

A Reflection by Elizabeth Lee

Pentecost 7B, end of NAIDOC Week

**Mark 6: 14-29; Contemporary Reading: from Sharron 'Mirii' Lindh,
on the creation of the song Ngurambangga Yanhanha**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

At the end of June, I travelled to (M parn t) Mparntwe / Alice Springs to join “*Women Walking Alongside Women*.” I walked 65km of the Larapinta Trail in the Western MacDonnell Ranges or (Choor it ja) Tjoritja to support a mentoring program for women coming out of jail. Definitely one of the most physically challenging things I have undertaken.

Josephine asked me if I would offer a reflection this Sunday, at the end of NAIDOC week. So I picked up my Missal to check the Gospel reading; Mark 6:7-13 - Jesus sending the disciples out in twos and to take nothing for the journey.

A fortuitous fit, I thought, while not quite taking “*nothing for the journey*” I did walk each day with a light-ish backpack and I had only packed a few changes of clothes.

But this is one of the few Sundays when the Revised Common Lectionary, followed in the Uniting Church, deviates from my old missal and, as we have heard this morning, the allocated reading was “the Beheading of John the Baptist.” Not a reading I would choose to include in our lectionary, let alone preach on! But maybe these are the stories we need to hear, stories that confront and challenge us.

Is the story of the beheading of John the Baptist any more horrific than the stories of the violent colonisation of these lands we now call Australia? The more than 300ⁱ, some say 500ⁱⁱ planned massacres that were then kept secret and aimed at eradicating the indigenous people or “natives”, as they were frequently described?ⁱⁱⁱ

As I explored images for this reflection, I was horrified by both the similarity between Caravaggio’s and Cruickshank’s artworks. Similar both in brutality and subject matter. Yagan was a Noongar leader and resistance fighter during the early years of the Swan River Colony. Following his murder at the hands of the colonists, ‘*Yagan’s head was brutally hacked from his body, wedged into a hollow tree stump and slowly preserved in the smoke of gum leaves. After several months, the lank hair was combed, a band of possum fur string was wrapped around the forehead and a pair of red and black cockatoo feathers added for effect*’. The head was then sent to England in 1833 to be held in the Liverpool Museum.^{iv} I note that it has since been returned.

And the violence continues: the brutality by police when arresting Aboriginal youth or the treatment of Adam Goodes by spectators. I quote Cecilia Kemp "*the powerful have controlled the physical and psychological space that First Nations people have been allowed to occupy, for a very long time. And punished when they don't conform*".^v

How can we listen to the uncomfortable stories of our past, learning from them and then include and transcend them as we grow and heal Country, heal our nation and walk with our indigenous sisters and brothers "*in a movement of the Australian people for a better future?*"^{vi}

Back in October last year, an invitation to join the "*Women Walking Alongside Women Larapinta walk*" as a fundraiser for the Women's Justice Network's mentoring program popped up on my Facebook page. But...

- It was a costly trip, and could I justify the expense?
- There was the fundraising commitment and I tend to shy away from fundraising.
- And then there was the prospect of a challenging 65 km walk over five days.

Despite my attempts to dismiss the idea, it kept creeping back into my awareness. I also happened to have an unexpected belated windfall from my parent's estate, so I decided to use that money to cover part of my costs. We were asked to raise \$3,000, I thought maybe I would aim for \$4,000 but my brother urged me to set the bar high at \$5,000. And immediately money started coming in. So that left the physical challenge which I began to prepare for in earnest, taking up personal training for the first time in my life, and John and I did a couple days of back-to-back walking. While never really confident that I would be capable of the walk, with so many people donating to the cause I had no choice but to set off.

Three weeks ago I flew into Alice Springs. Once through the rigorous border checks by Northern Territory Health, one would not be aware that we were living in a COVID world. Alice Springs was a relaxed yet thriving tourist town, with little attention to QR codes and an absence of facemasks beyond the airport.

I sensed that the Centre, at least superficially, had not changed much since I was there 13 years ago. We were warned not to walk the streets at night, not be seen carrying alcohol, and despite so much of the local economy depending on the land and culture of the Arrernte People, it seems that by and large we are still ignoring the story of the people who have lived here for some thirty - forty - fifty - thousand years and are still a long way from voice, treaty and truth.

Uncle Craig shared stories with us in the Olive Pink Botanic Gardens, the evening before we set off on the walk, but except for a few small snippets and some bush tucker canapés one evening that was the only "indigenous" input we had. Uncle Craig told us that the Arrernte People did not swim in the waterholes yet we were still invited to pack our swimmers!

As I walked the five days, the words of Sharron Lindh that we heard in our contemporary reflection, this morning, eloquently expressed my experience of Walking on Country. Mother Earth and Father Sky were with me, as where the ancestors of the Arrernte People and my own ancestors. I was entranced by all the colours of the earth, each step honouring every living thing. The resilience of the plants growing in such harsh conditions gave me strength to continue when the going was tough.

Henri Nouwen says: “*Only when we make a deep bow to the rivers, ocean, hills and mountains that offer us a home, only then can they become transparent and reveal to us their real meaning*”. I had a real sense of belonging to both Country and among the women with whom I was walking.

For the 13 women trekking freely shared their stories as we walked across these amazing lands. Stories that inspired, motivated and encouraged. Stories that broke my heart, enraged and caused me to question. Stories shared and received with reverence as we walked on this sacred country. Some of the women worked for or were on the board of Women’s Justice Network, a couple were mentors, but 7 of us were newcomers to the organisation. A doctor, lawyer, physiotherapist, teacher, chaplain, social worker, barista, caseworker, entrepreneur. Knitters, artists, photographers, yogis. Mothers, grandmothers, aunts and orphans. Regardless all of us had a desire that things could be better for women and men leaving our jails. The stories shared made my spirit strong.

But there is the story of one person I would like to share with you, that of Bekki. She has given permission for me to tell her story publicly, in the hope that it can make a difference for other women in the future. Bekki was featured on Four Corners in 2019.^{vii} She has been in and out of jail over a period of about 10 years. Break and enter, driving while disqualified, driving under the influence of ice, escaping police custody. Stealing money, reckless driving and drug taking had caused much havoc among her family. About 95% of women and 85% of men in custody have experienced some form of abuse and Bekki was no different. As a 6-year-old she was sexually abused.

Bekki says that she does not know, if the abuse affected her as much, as not being believed. She felt that she was unlovable and so did whatever she could to numb the pain of rejection and low self-worth. Taking ice and risk taking, particularly behind the wheel of the car, were seen as great band aid solutions. Yes she went to rehab, frequently as a way of avoiding going to jail, but she did not really want to give up the drugs.

However there did come a moment when she could do it no more and she wanted to change. But how? It was a hard slog. For Bekki it involved a spiritual, physical, emotional and social transformation. A 10-month rehabilitation program, coming to know she was loved by God, reconciliation with her immediate family members, moving away from her previous social networks and before any of this, a relationship with a mentor who believed in her. A mentor from the Women’s Justice Network.

Bekki’s story came to mind as I read the Mark account of the beheading of John the Baptist. We hear of a girl, who dances for Herod and his guests. This girl is frequently portrayed as a young woman, who danced in a deliberately seductive manner, but according to some scholars she was not a young woman but a little girl.^{viii} Maybe she was six, a free loving spirit who danced at the request of her father, a man of power and influence. A little girl who danced before a court circle filled with powerful and influential men, pleasing both father and guests. In an extravagant and reckless gesture - or was it a moment of bravado before his distinguished audience - Herod promised to give her whatever she wanted. Such an overwhelming offer to a young child! So, she seeks the advice of her mother, Herodias, and in doing so gets drawn into the opportunistic vengeance of grudge carrying adults. I wonder what impact this had on the life of this little girl?

Maybe the story is not factually true, for it does not align with the account of the historian Josephus. But like most biblical literature it is not important if it is historically accurate, rather we need to listen for the story below the story and also listen to the how the Word challenges us today.

Individuals like Bekki have had their lives detrimentally impacted by the inappropriate power and manipulation games of adults, sacrificed like pawns on a chessboard for the sake of the knights, bishops, queens and kings, so the powerful can claim victory.

But it is not just individuals. We, who have heard or read the “Statement from the Heart” will be familiar with the following quote: *“Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.”*^{ix}

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up almost 30% of the total Australian prison population, while comprising just over 3% of the general population.^x Unfair laws and policies are still in place that disproportionately target Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, like laws that allow children between the age of 10 and 13 to be sent to prison, and mandatory sentencing.^{xi} Frequently these youngsters are refused bail because they do not have a suitable address, so in effect we are imprisoning children because they are homeless or lack housing security.

I note that the writer of Gospel places this story after Jesus has sent the disciples out in pairs giving them authority over unclean spirits. They go on to cast out many demons, curing the sick. Then following this account of John’s beheading, the disciples return to Jesus and telling of what they had done and taught. Given Josephus’ differing account, we need to ask why Mark includes this story and why he has placed it at this point in the Gospel? And why it should be included in our lectionary and proclaimed in our Churches, particularly on this Sunday in NAIDOC Week?

We need to tell the stories of the children being abused, be it physically, emotionally, sexually or because of neglect - and not collude with a culture of silence and denial. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people want their voice to be heard. Lasting and effective agreement cannot be achieved unless we have a shared, truthful understanding of the history, of how we got to where we now stand. The true story of colonisation must be told, must be heard, must be acknowledged. Hearing this history is necessary before we can come to some true reconciliation and genuine healing for both sides. And of course, this is not just the history of our First Peoples – it is the history of all of us, of all of Australia, and we need to own it. Only then we can move forward together.^{xii} This is what we were saying during NAIDOC week last year, but we need to be saying it and demanding it every week not just one week a year. So, I invite you to take a moment to consider:

- Where are we, individually and collectively, in this Biblical story: dinner guest, little girl, Herodias or Herod?
- What is this story inviting us to do now?
- What will be different because this story is proclaimed as Good News in our Church today?

i <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/introduction.php>

ii <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/massacres-the-frontier-violence-thats-hard-to-accept>

iii <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/introduction.php>

iv <https://www.noongarculture.org.au/yagan/>

v P58 Cecilia Kemp

vi Uluru Statement from the Heart

vii <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYJ7BddxpT4>

viii <https://margmowczko.com/salome-was-the-dancing-daughter-of-herodias-a-child/>

ix Uluru Statement from the Heart. <https://ulurustatement.org/>

x <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/deaths-in-custody-action-on-justice-needed/>

xi <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/deaths-in-custody-action-on-justice-needed/>

xii <https://www.naidoc.org.au/get-involved/2019-theme>