

# Relationship, Galgala, Yabun

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 23 January 2022

A reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Epiphany 3C, Day of Mourning

Contemporary reading: *A Word for the Day of Mourning*: by Nathan Tyson<sup>i</sup>  
Luke 4: 14-21.

The video of this worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the scripts from which the reflectors spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

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Good morning!

It is a delight to be back here in Pitt Street after several weeks away on personal 'sorry business' and study leave. In the context of the continuing pandemic, it has certainly been what some might call an 'interesting' time, marking an important watershed in my own life and that of my wider birth family.

In offering some reflections today, I would therefore like to begin by expressing my deep gratitude for the many, many, wonderful expressions of support from members of our Pitt Street community, and for the prayers which have been offered. I continue to be so grateful for the gift of loving relationships I am given as part of our life together, and I look forward to their further and deeper unfolding in the days to come. For relationship is such a core element of our lives, and never more important than at times of loss, grief, challenge and growth.

As such, it is so absolutely foundational to the Day of Mourning we mark today, as well as to the trials of the pandemic world with which we continue to journey, and the struggles of our own particular lives. In the light of these things, my own recent and continuing journey, and of our readings today, I offer up relationship as one of three words which might be central to our considerations at this time.

Years ago, I worked for a while with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission of the National Council of Churches. It was an extraordinary time of learning and challenge, of fun, growth, and despair. At my exit interview, my boss asked me what I had particularly learned. So many things, I responded, including not least so much that I have to unlearn.

Above all however, I said, it was relationship: Relationship – relationship – relationship: on so many ways, and levels; with all things; at a depth of such intimacy and interconnection; despite so many huge ruptures, violence and dispossession – past and present, in individual lives, families, and communities. Without grasping the importance of relationship – what Pitjantjara people call *kanyini* – we are lost. For '*every living thing is family*', as Uncle Bob Randall used to say.

First and foremost, the Day of Mourning we mark today is therefore about acknowledging relationship, both that which has been lost and that which remains. So much of that is beyond words but it is written in the bodies that remain and in the land itself, sometimes with terrible scars. For we cannot have relationship, begin, or renew, relationship without mourning; and it is inscribed in bodies, land and culture, positively and negatively.

That has been one of the deep learnings of my recent journey. When those we love are torn from us, we not only lose them but we also lose so much else to which they are connected: all kinds of connections, places, memories, and other profound relationships. We too walk through the valley of many other deaths, and live, or re-live, the pains of extinguishment, emigration and exile from those things which formed and gave us life.

Those of us who are not Aboriginal cannot feel the depths of meaning, and loss of meaning, which this Day of Mourning represents. Yet each of us, out of our own experiences of loss and mourning, can perhaps connect – and, in connecting, deepen our understanding and open the way to new relationship. That is part of the point and purpose of this Day, and why, following the original Aboriginal inspiration and Congress' call, the Uniting Church of Australia has made this a national time of mourning.

Relationship – this is the core and continuing challenge. Nathan Tyson, one of our leading local Aboriginal Uniting Church voices, puts it well, in his Word to us this year. We have heard a portion of this in our first reading today, but I encourage you to watch Nathan's full address, which is available to view on our Pitt Street Facebook page, as well as elsewhere (<https://vimeo.com/665087086>).

As he says, it is not enough for our Churches to declare apologies and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is important, but not enough, for example, for us to mark the Day of Mourning. Critically, we need to be *'taking the time to effectively engage and develop trust and relationships with Aboriginal people and communities.'* This Day of Mourning therefore underpins the words we heard from Lionel Robson, on the first Sunday of this year, about the call to relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as core to our futures as both a country and a church.

Nathan is candid in his Word to us about the uncomfortable challenge that genuine relationship involves. Healthy mourning, after all, involves many things, including facing up to sometimes very difficult truths about ourselves and beginning again. As Nathan says, *'deep loss and grief can continue to be a source of frustration, distress and anger for many'* and this is not always easy to manage. Yet, without traveling the pathways of truth-telling and recognition, there can be no genuine mourning or process of healing. We cannot do this at secondhand, or from a distance.

So, among other things, I warmly welcome the recent initiative from Nathan to encourage Pitt Street, with other local Uniting churches, to come together for intentional work together on these matters. With other Uniting leaders, Nathan will also be pleased to walk with any of us who feel able, on Survival Day, this Wednesday 26 January, gathering on the steps of Pitt Street Uniting Church at 9.30 am.

Looking forward, may we also continue to grow the engagement which members of this community have with Aboriginal peoples in other ways, and take up the opportunities which groups such as Common Grace also offer us at this time. For more than any plans we already have for advocacy around issues such as the Statement of the Heart, it is the nurture of actual relationships which really matters. Relationships - all else that truly heals flows from that.

My second word is an Aboriginal word – *galgala* – from the language of the first people of this particular land. *Galgala* – do we know that word, hear it, speak it? It is truly a word of great dread. Think Covid-19, and all that that represents... Now multiply what that means, without any modern medicine, any vaccines, and without any provision, any foresight, any real concern, whatsoever, by government – and in a native population, for whom relationship was everything. That is the impact of *galgala*.

Some of us will know a little of the story. Stephen Gapps outlined it not so long ago in his book *The Sydney Wars: conflict in the early colony*. Here is a brief excerpt about Australia's first staggering pandemic in 1789, putting our Covid-19 issues into some perspective:

*For several weeks Sydney Harbour was a scene of death. So too was Broken Bay, where, an expedition in June reported, 'in many places our path was covered with skeletons, and the same spectacles were to be met with in the hollows of most of the rocks... Indeed, (Governor) Phillip said, 'We have seen traces of it wherever we have been.'*

It is reckoned that, during the colonial period, across the globe smallpox fatalities among indigenous populations previously untouched would on average suffer 50-70% deaths. For the Gadigal of this immediate place, the rate (according to recent historical calculations) was more like ninety percent. Even with our Covid-19 struggles, can we even imagine the impact? Not a single colonist died from the disease. This is but one thing we mourn today in this place.

Silence about *galgala* – and so, so, much else – continues to distort this land, and all our lives. Historically, we might see things very differently. As Stephen Gapps observes:

*We will never know what might have occurred around Sydney in the 1790s if Aboriginal society had not been devastated by disease. It happened when the colony's military capacity was at its weakest and the Sydney warriors at their strongest, effectively controlling the terrain outside the encampment... Galgala determined the shape of the next few years of conflict, if not the outcome of the wars...*

Do we feel the sadness, the anxiety, the terror, the sheer despair? So much of this can only be taken to, and held by, God, in silence. Yet we can perhaps connect in some ways from our own mourning: from the mourning of those in recent times from other lands who have lost their land, their families, their cultures; from our own personal mourning and loss of connections; from our communal Covid-19 experiences; and, above all, as Nathan Tyson says to us today, from the continuing losses, violence and mourning suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in our own times. In Nathan's words:

*The reality is that many things that were done to First Peoples, both by Governments and colonists, are disgustingly awful and at times simply evil... We live with the grief and trauma that is the legacy.*

This, as Nathan says, is what we name or hold in the impossibility of naming, in our worship today. Such truth-telling and lament, voiced and beyond voicing, is at the heart of the Day of Mourning. Yet it is not its end. For in and beyond mourning, in the spirit of Christ, there is the potential of new life. Out of the depths of darkness and death, light can break. In and beyond *galgala*, there is still relationship, and there is *yabun*.

Yabun – of all the words left to us in Gadigal, this must be among the most life-giving. Yabun means ‘*music with a beat*’ – what a wonderful expression! and Yabun is, of course, the name of the largest one-day celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in Australia, taking place each year, here in Sydney, on 26 January. This year it marks its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary and offers a wonderful opportunity to connect and grow relationship – whether we feel able to go in person or join in via the [yabun.org.au](http://yabun.org.au) website or Koori radio. From an Aboriginal point of view it is indeed particularly important. For, as John Lela, of the Gadigal Information Service, has said in the past:

*"It's a real safe space where you go to connect back to community. Celebrating our own survival and our resistance against what [mainstream Australia] calls Australia Day really sets the tone for the year to come... (with) opportunity to learn, share and understand how Aboriginal people have maintained and practised culture and the land."*<sup>ii</sup>

I don't know about you, but I tend to think that if you can't see the risen Christ in Yabun, then you can't really see the risen Christ in Sydney much at all. For today's Gospel reading cannot be read without the pain and passion of the Bible. The Jesus who speaks in the synagogue proclaiming divine liberation is the same Jesus we meet elsewhere about whom all is said is that they 'wept'. Mourning is a core element of biblical faith. Lamentations is not just a single, easily passed-over, book in the Bible, but a continuing aspect of the spiritual journey.

Truth-telling is unavoidable, together with the need for metanoia – awakening and changing, turning direction – so that justice may be done and a new creation emerge. Yet, out of the depths of mourning, Jesus in our Gospel re-proclaims the essential biblical promise of that new creation - shalom and justice. Jesus speaks the Word that Isaiah gave us, born from the depths of destruction and despair in the exile of God's people, out of wrenches, dispossession, violence, mourning and lamentation.

Jesus utters that transforming Word, and embodies it in their life and being, just as Nathan does in his own address today – dancing us into new life with yabun, music with a divine heartbeat.

The question is – are we listening in our hearts, and how will we respond?

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<sup>i</sup> Nathan Tyson, is the Manager of First Peoples Strategy and Engagement, with the Uniting Synod NSW/ACT. (<https://vimeo.com/665087086>).

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-25/australia-day-yabun-festival-celebrates-aboriginal-resilience/11878282>