

What do reconciliation and unity look like now?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 29 May 2022

A reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Week of Prayer for Reconciliation and for Christian Unity

Revelation 22: 12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17: 20-26

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 script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

In recent years some of my Aboriginal friends have said to me that they do not believe in the Australian concept of Reconciliation - and the activities, like Reconciliation Action Plans, which have accompanied it. Meanwhile some Church leaders have said to me that they do not see much point in engaging actively in ecumenical endeavours. So why, we might ask, are we marking the Week of Prayer for Reconciliation and the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity this morning?

Actually I did wonder about changing the title on the front of our liturgy sheet today to '*Prayer for Just Relationships and for Communion in Christian Diversity*'. That, for me, would be at least part acknowledgment of the difficulties of the words Reconciliation and Christian Unity and the need for re-imagining as well as building on the good work of the past. However I have left Reconciliation and Christian Unity in the title for the present, so that we honour where we have travelled.

Nonetheless, as we hear our two readings this morning, we do well to reflect more deeply on the words and constructions we may use in order that we share in more fruitful pathways for our work together with others. For that purpose, I also offer you the cartoon meme entitled the #4thBox, as an encouragement to deeper prayer, more imaginative reflection and more creative action.

Certainly, when we come to issues related to Australia's First Nations, it is a good time for this reconsideration. For at the start and end of our new Prime Minister's very fine speech on election night the promise was made to implement the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full.

That, in itself, is a big promise, to which the ALP needs holding and supporting. It cannot however merely be left to Government. The Uluru Statement from the Heart speaks of many things, not just a degree of constitutional change and a Voice to Parliament. How will all parts of Australian society do our part?

Again, how we picture the task is important. Whilst welcoming Mr Albanese's promise for example, some of my Aboriginal friends have already pointed out that announcing such vital intent with the use of a phrase such as '*traditional owners*' also highlights part of the problem.

Affirming, as the new Prime Minister also did, that we live in 'the best country in the world' also risks underplaying the challenge of facing up to the illegitimacy of Australia as still a 'settler colony', based on an usurpation of sovereignty – not just a neglect of traditional ownership, but failing to affirm the continuing reality of the land itself, which 'was, is, and always will be' Aboriginal.

Again, whilst political focus will inevitably now be on the constitutional Voice, what of the call for truth-telling, treaty processes, restorations and restitutions, and other elements in the Uluru Statement of the Heart? All of us are also therefore challenged today by what we mean by seeking Reconciliation and Unity. How do we understand them now, and what are the next steps for us? That is the question I want to ask today.

I do not have any neat answers myself, but they go to the heart of what we need to consider as we respond to the new context opened up by the recent Federal election and as we begin to develop our mission action planning process in the next few months.

For what, for example, do the many challenges of the Uluru Statement of the Heart mean for us in our community which is, after all, still named after a series of British Prime Ministers – that is, Pitt - the last of whom, William Pitt the Younger, was the Prime Minister involved with authorising the invasion of this land, and of most of the first two critical decades of dispossession and violence? I'm not necessarily suggesting a name change, but perhaps that alone might prompt us to reflect much deeper upon our own community's history and complicity with oppression?

Our bible readings today do not provide us with straightforward guidance as we reflect upon both Reconciliation and Unity. They do however offer us four important themes which may help us on the next stages of our journey. Let me briefly outline each in turn.

Firstly, truth-telling. Our first reading from Revelation chapter 22 has one negative and one positive element. The negative element is easily concealed from us. For the compilers of our lectionary have, presumably quite deliberately, excised verses 14-15 and 18-19 from the scriptural text they have provided us to read. I am sure you most of us can see why they have done so as I read them now:

¹⁴ Blessed are those who wash their robes,^[c] so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. ¹⁵ Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral^[d](or prostitutes) and murderers and idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

¹⁸ I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; ¹⁹ if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

Those verses are not comfortable, are they? Rather, like the very uncomfortable realities of Australian history and Christian divisions, they are things we would prefer not to look at too closely. Yet, unless we do so, genuine fresh advances in both Reconciliation and Unity will remain elusive. Truth-telling, as the Uluru Statement from the Heart affirms, is central.

Secondly, Invitation to begin again. More positively, in the verses left in our first reading today, our Biblical tradition reminds us of the constant Invitation of God to a new beginning.

'Come Lord Jesus' – or 'Maranatha' in the original language – this is the repeated refrain. Thereby the last book of the Bible does not so much close the canon of scripture as open the door to deeper relationship and renewal. We are not to rest on our laurels, such as they are, but rather we are to invite the love of God into enabling further transformation in our lives, our patterns of community, and our world. What a vital message to us at this time, as we pray and seek to nurture a new Pentecost in this land and among Christians together.

Thirdly, prayer. Note well how the ending of Revelation, and thus of the Bible as a whole, is a prayer. We are not given either a blueprint, or a set of instructions, for the implementation of God's vision. Instead we are invited more deeply into participation in the love and mystery of God. This is also core to our reading from John chapter 17, and indeed the whole of the so-called 'Farewell Discourse' in John's Gospel. The only 'commandment' we are given in that whole section is that 'to love one another' - which, in itself, is not a commandment in the usual legal or instructional sense. Instead, as in today's reading, the heart of responding to God is actually to participate in the prayer of God in Godself.

Fourthly, divine diversity. Truth-telling, an invitation to transformation, and living as divine prayer, are three of the great themes we are given today for us to explore as we seek to engage afresh with our journeys into Reconciliation and Christian Unity. A fourth theme however sits with, and underpins them: namely the dance of diversity in the divine communion – and this takes us into the heart of God.

When I said earlier that I was tempted to replace Reconciliation and Unity in the title of our liturgy today with 'Just Relationships' and with 'Communion in Diversity', this is because my experience is that unless these are not only present, but are actually seen as the real goals, then we have missed the point of Reconciliation and Unity. For Reconciliation and Unity can indeed become window-dressing and a suppressing of the pain and full voices of the marginalised.

Instead, my response to today's scripture readings is to see them as inspirations to genuine truth-telling, as invitations to deeper transformation and to living prayer, and to giving preference to receiving and celebrating the gifts of God-given diversity rather than trying to establish a 'one-size fits all' commonality. In my view, neither Reconciliation nor Christian Unity can be renewed without these.

Let me leave you therefore with the cartoon meme and invitation to re-imagine on the front of our liturgy sheet. I was drawn to this recently as Penny and I have been exploring how to share with others the gift and invitation of Queer, or Queering, Theologies. It also resonates with me in trying to make sense of some struggles I have had with the current understanding of both transgender people and of church unity in the Uniting Church.

This image is one of a long line of adaptations of an original meme, by Angus Maguire, developed by the Interaction Institute for Social Change.¹ It helps illustrate the difference between the two concepts of equality and equity by showing a side-by-side comparison of three people of varying heights watching a baseball match over a fence. Since the original formulation, there have been literally hundreds (perhaps thousands) of different adaptations, most with wording changes, but some that also manipulated the original image as well in order to convey a slightly different idea.²

¹ [Illustrating Equality VS Equity - Interaction Institute for Social Change : Interaction Institute for Social Change](https://www.interactioninstitute.org/illustrating-equality-vs-equity)

² See further The Evolution of an Accidental Meme
<https://medium.com/@CRA1G/the-evolution-of-an-accidental-meme-ddc4e139e0e4#.pqiclk8pl>

A picture can often paint a thousand words. My view is that all of the first three boxes in the cartoon meme are valuable. Each says something we need to hear, both in terms of Reconciliation and Christian Unity, and also about the struggles and potential of many on the margins of Church and society. However, for me, the 4th box is the key one for us to consider and act upon.

For even when the fence is taken away in the box marked Liberation, the figures still remain on the outside looking in, not on the pitch adding their own gifts and creating new forms of play. That needs fixing. Maybe they might even help to change the game itself? That is the invitation to us, in praying today for Reconciliation and Christian Unity and for other activities to nurture God's justice and share in deeper communion with richer diversity: the invitation, if you like, to 'queer' this land, our Church and the wider world, with God's imagination, dancing in diversity.

So - over to you - how do each of us picture the fourth box?

How will we picture it, pray it, and live into it together, with others?

How will pray 'Maranatha', 'queer' our world, and dance in the divine communion of holy diversity?

In the name of the Holy Trinity which dances in diversity with justice and joy. Amen.