

# Recognition, Healing and Renewal

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 15 October 2023

A Reflection by Allison Gentle

Pentecost 20A (Day after the Voice Referendum)

**Contemporary Readings: *Son of Mine (To Denis)* by Oodgeroo Noonuccal;  
*From A Firelight Stick on the Hill* by Patrick Dodson; Isaiah 25: 1-9**

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

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The prophet Isaiah speaks of the wonderful things God has done and will do, what God has done in times of conflict and oppression and what God will do when salvation comes.

In recent weeks and months, we have felt the blast of the ruthless like a winter rainstorm, and heard their noisy song like heat in a dry place. Isaiah tells us that in times of oppression, God is a refuge for the poor, the needy and the distressed. God provides shelter from the storm, shade from the heat, and the stilling of the noisy song.

But on the mountain, on the day of salvation, all people will sit down to a feast. God will wipe away all tears, all shame, the tears and the shame of oppressors and oppressed alike. Because salvation is the healing not just of the oppressed, but of the divided community.

Today we sit in a painful present - between a time of conflict and a time of healing that feels barely possible. After the carefully crafted process that led to the grace-filled invitation called the Uluru Statement from the Heart, to watch the campaign of lies and distortions, amplified by sections of the media and social media, and to see this false reality prevail among so many voters, has been heartbreaking for many Voice supporters.

It's more heartbreaking the more we know of the history up to this point. Terra Nullius, the first great convenient misunderstanding, the first great insult. To First Nations people it was the first denial of their existence. The historian Henry Reynolds said it was more that the first Europeans didn't recognise the First Nations people's use of the land as reflecting ownership. The First Nations people weren't planting crops or raising herds, therefore they were nomads. So the Europeans said Australia was *terra nullius*, not meaning uninhabited land, but land belonging to no-one, and the brutal dispossession began.

The relationship between First Nations people and the land was too sophisticated for the Europeans to understand, with the people belonging to the land, sustainable resource management and sovereignty as a spiritual notion, never ceded or extinguished, as noted in the Uluru Statement from the Heart. And the tragic irony of the barbarous colonisers considering First Nations people to be uncivilized while they trashed one of the most advanced civilisations in the world, according to anthropologists. And this tragic irony continues to our own times. The sense of Europeans denying the existence of First Nations people was confirmed in their omission from the constitution, censuses and voter rolls.

When First Nations people survived in spite of massacres, introduced diseases, and miserable living conditions on missions, the colonisers developed protectionist, assimilationist and integration policies, involving coercive bureaucratic control. First Nations people needed official permission to marry or to travel their own land. Children were taken from their parents to institutions where they were trained as domestic servants or adopted into white families, a process later named as cultural genocide.

The tide began to turn in 1967, with the successful referendum that allowed First Nations people to be counted in the census and the federal government to pass legislation for them. Notably, that referendum had bipartisan support. But this also marked the beginning of what Patrick Dodson calls the long and winding road of advocacy. The 1967 referendum turned out to be a mixed blessing, because while it had been assumed that the government would use their legislative powers to improve the lot of First Nations people, it was not always the case. Denying the women who tried to protect the Hindmarsh Island Bridge as a traditional site of women's business was done under those powers, and so was the notorious Northern Territory intervention, which imposed restrictions on welfare recipients there that were not imposed on welfare recipients anywhere else.

In between these events, there have been highlights, all the work of Labor governments. Whitlam's emphasis on self-determination was a game-changer. Even though his tenure was cut short before his policies bore fruit, it changed the discourse of the advocates. Keating's Redfern speech and Rudd's apology were significant and appreciated. First Nations people have also felt encouraged by strong turnouts at marches and calls for volunteers.

Over that time there have been eleven advisory bodies, each one disbanded for political reasons. Dodson likened this process to the myth of Sisyphus, whose punishment by the gods was to roll a boulder up a hill and watch it roll back down again, over and over again. This is why the authors of the Uluru statement felt it so important that an advisory body be enshrined in the constitution. Noel Pearson said "*Race and the Aboriginal problem of Australia is about white Australians in a cultural and political struggle with other white Australians.*" In the same vein, one of the panelists on the ABC coverage last night said, "*They talk about us, not with us.*"

Listening to First Nations people talk about their history, there is a sense of chronic disempowerment. Dodson tells of seeing a plaque with the remains of Vincent Lingiari, who led the Wave Hill Station walk-off that started the land rights movement. The plaque said "*We want to live on our land, our way.*" This spoke to Dodson of the persistent differences and misunderstanding, and also the importance of country. He called it "*a plea and a lament.*" The Uluru statement speaks of a better future based on justice and self-determination. When a people speak of self-determination as a plea and an aspiration, it is clear that their current reality is systemic oppression.

So where is Isaiah's vision of salvation in this story? I am reminded of the one whose advent Isaiah foretold, the one who unrolled a scroll in the temple and read Isaiah's prophecy about him, the one who came to proclaim freedom for captives, sight for the blind and to bring freedom for the oppressed. Jesus described this as his work in the world, which points to liberation as akin to salvation.

In the middle of last century, a wave of theological movements began in South America that came to be known as liberation theologies. Roman Catholic leaders there started to agitate for the church to move beyond giving charity to the poor, and start to protest against the oppressive social structures that cause poverty. They traced the divine mandate for this through the Bible, which shows God consistently taking the part of the poor, the captive, the exiled, the oppressed. These principles have since been taken up by Christian leaders supporting many oppressed groups, including Black Americans, minorities in India, women and LGBTIQ+ people. These movements have confronted those in churches who do not wish to get involved in politics with the consequence that our inaction makes us complicit in the oppression abhorred by the God we claim to serve.

Liberation theologians have also taken the emphasis away from the notion of personal sin and placed a much greater emphasis on corporate or institutional sin. This has accordingly created a shift in the meaning of salvation. It's less about the individual being forgiven for falling short and being reconciled to God, and more about God's desire to end oppression and reconcile the whole world to Godself.

Liberation theologies have attracted negative reactions and attempts at suppression, mostly from church establishments claiming to be wary of the Marxist elements in their social analysis. Yet these theologies remain compelling, not least because once they have been taken into consciousness, every encounter with the Bible confirms their truth, that relieving oppression is God's will. One criticism which has some validity is that liberation theologies tend to emphasise social healing and neglect personal and spiritual healing. But there's no reason why liberation or salvation can't operate across dimensions of human experience.

Much of the outreach of Pitt Street is centered on social justice concerns: we have members working for ecological justice, justice for refugees, justice for LGBTIQ+ people, and advocacy for the Voice, all concerns that align with liberation theologies. We are not afraid to engage in political action, addressing the structural causes of injustice.

However, liberation of oppressed people never has happened quickly. *"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."* This was said by Barack Obama, who was quoting Martin Luther King. And Martin Luther King was quoting an abolitionist minister from the time of slavery. I like to think of this baton of encouraging wisdom being passed down through those mighty social justice warriors across two hundred years.

*"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."*

I think it is particularly encouraging to us at this time in the struggle of our First Nations people. Setbacks are to be expected, and they don't mean that justice has failed, the arc is still bending, and our efforts for the Voice are a part of a long process, Dodson's long and winding road. We might have hoped we were closer to the end of that road, but we can see now we still have some way to go. Or as Anthony Albanese, our Prime Minister, said last night, *"Tomorrow we will seek a new way forward."* And his tomorrow is already now.

So, all those who found space in their lives to volunteer for the Voice campaign, you might need to pray for speed healing because your First Nations leaders are some of the most resilient people on the planet, and they are already planning their next steps. We need to follow them closely, especially when the news cycle moves on, and listen for our marching orders. They may come before God has wiped away our tears. May we be ready.

Amen.