

Hope in times of trial and disappointment

21 January 2024 – Aboriginal Sunday

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge that we meet this morning on the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and that the Spirit was in the land revealing God to them through law, custom and ceremony.

The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the Wurundjeri people and gave them particular insights into God's ways.

Therefore, we honour the wisdom of the Wurundjeri Elders and their continuing culture, and pray that we might all work together for reconciliation and justice in this nation.

INTRODUCTION TO TODAY'S SERVICE

Friends, today we are remembering the challenging history of our nation and the violent dispossession of her First Peoples.

We are joining with many other churches across several denominations by marking the day as Aboriginal Sunday, a day for Christians to go **deeper on the journey** of listening, learning and praying for Aboriginal people.

We will also pray for ourselves – for forgiveness, healing and hope.

As we prepare our hearts to listen and engage, we acknowledge the past year has been difficult for Indigenous people in this country due to the **Voice Referendum**. The referendum revealed that many Australians do support giving Aboriginal people a greater say in matters affecting them, yet it also showed how much work there is left to do on the journey of pursuing love, justice, reconciliation and truth-telling with our First Nation Peoples.

LEARNING MORE ABOUT OUR LOCAL INDIGENOUS MOB

Read *Welcome to Country* by Aunty Joy Murphy and Lisa Kennedy

BIBLE READINGS

Psalm 85:8-13

I will listen to what God the Lord says;

the Lord promises peace to God's people, God's faithful servants –
but let them not turn to folly.

Surely the Lord's salvation is near,

that God's glory may dwell in our land.

Love and faithfulness meet together;

righteousness and peace kiss each other.

Faithfulness springs forth from the earth,

and righteousness looks down from heaven.

The Lord will indeed give what is good,

and our land will yield its harvest.

Righteousness goes before the Lord

and prepares the way for God's steps.

Romans 8:19-27

Creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as God's children, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And the One who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

MESSAGE Hope in times of trial and disappointment

It's good to be back with you after spending nearly two months in **Aotearoa, the land of the long white cloud**, a very appropriate name given that the mountains seem to attract long white clouds nearly every day.

We really enjoyed our time away and especially the many walks through beautiful forests, along beaches and up





mountains. There are many stories to share that you may hear over the next few weeks and months.

It wasn't just about walking, though, as we also spent time exploring the history and culture of NZ, especially the Maori culture, which is similar in some ways to Indigenous culture here in

Australia, but in other ways is quite distinct.

One of the places to explore Maori culture is the fabulous Te Papa museum in Wellington, whose name means 'container of treasures'. One small treasure that I came across in the museum was about different attitudes to land and the contrast between a Western mindset and an Indigenous mindset.



So I wonder what is your attitude to land?
Or whether you've ever thought about it?

For most of us brought up with a Western mindset, land is something to be owned, to be bought and sold in a commercial transaction ... just as we are doing with the land up the hill from here that will shortly go on sale as lots for housing.

It's interesting that the concept of individuals owning land – private property – is relatively recent, a by-product of the industrial revolution of the mid-18th century. Prior to then, land was generally under the control and ownership of the monarch or the state, who could make grants of land to people, with some areas designated as public or common land that anyone could use.

In a modern Western mindset, then, land is usually sold to the highest bidder to be used for some productive use – be that to provide a home, or to make a profit through farming, industry or mining. Land that is less easily exploited – because it is too steep or liable to flooding or has some intrinsic beauty may be set aside as public land, such as a national park.





We visited several such national parks in NZ – wild, rugged places of beauty where nature rather than humanity rules and that are seen as having environmental value as well as aesthetic and perhaps even spiritual value.

To an indigenous person, however, whether Maori or Aboriginal or Islander, land is viewed

very differently.

Rather than an individual or even a community owning land, in many ways the land owns the people. There is an intimate and ongoing connection between land – or country – and people, and between people and their ancestors whose spirits live on in the land.



In the words of Aboriginal Elder Ambelin K,

For Aboriginal peoples, country is much more than a place. ... Country is loved, needed, and cared for, and country loves, needs, and cares for her peoples in turn. Country is family, culture, identity.

Deputy Chair of the Northern Land Council, John C writes this,

We weren't looking after the land only for somebody else to come and take it away. We were the owners. And occupiers. And custodians. And caretakers.

This strong and intimate connection between land and people was often severed during colonisation when Aboriginal people were forced from their ancestral land and sent far away from their land to live in government decreed reserves like Lake Tyers or Flinders Island.

During the time of the Stolen Generations, children were separated not just from their parents and communities but from land and culture and identity.

As Second Peoples we struggle to understand the generational pain and grief this caused, although we recognise how strongly we can become attached to a church building or a family home or farm in just two or three generations. Indigenous connection to the land runs much deeper and longer than this, over thousands of generations.



But perhaps there is a third way of understanding land.



In the OT, Abraham is promised land and many descendants. This narrative of Promised Land and Chosen People became a key part of Jewish identity that is seen even today in the conflict with Palestinians, who claim a similar inheritance to the land now called Israel.

In the NT, however, Christians are not promised an ongoing earthly home but rather a home in heaven. Land and houses are part of the order that is passing away and therefore not to be clung to ... a message that church leaders down through history seem to have largely ignored, where property has been highly desired and protected!



What if we viewed land as ultimately belonging to our Creator God that we are simply stewards of, or caretakers? This seems closer to me to an Indigenous perspective of land and closer to the call of humanity in the creation account of Genesis 2 where Adam is placed in the garden to care for it.

I wonder what we might gain if we adopted more of an Indigenous perspective on land as something that nurtures and sustains us rather than as a commodity to be

bought and sold and exploited?

I want to change track now and reflect briefly on how hard the last year has been for those who view seeking justice as a key part of our Christian calling, based on texts like Micah 6:8,

*God has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.*



In the last year, our world seems to be groaning, in the words of the Romans 8 passage we heard earlier. We have witnessed chilling massacres, wars that target civilians and a succession of natural disasters as global air temperatures reached a level not seen for 150,000 years while COP meetings seem to

achieve very little.

For those concerned with seeking justice for Indigenous people in Australia, 2023 was a tough year as the bright hopes of a Voice to Parliament were well and truly squashed by the decisive 'no' vote in the referendum, with 60% of Australians voting against the proposed change.

*In the face of such setbacks and disappointments,
what are Christians to do?*

One approach would be to quietly withdraw from the world and hide.

Another temptation is to give up or spiral into depression, a very real possibility for many of Jesus' followers after the events of Good Friday – as we hear echoed in Luke's story of the two travelers going to Emmaus.

But a more helpful approach is to recognise and name the hope we have as followers of the risen Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus marked a new day, a new start, a new

hope. Life and love and light won out over death and defeat and darkness.

The God we worship is the God who raised Jesus from death and who offers us new life and new possibilities.

In the Romans reading we are called to continue to hold onto hope even if we can't always see it, to hope for what we don't yet have and to wait patiently.

While each of us no doubt has a view on the Referendum outcome, is it a case of the glass being half empty or half full? A clear majority voted against the proposal, but over 6 million Australians voted 'Yes', so there is reason for optimism that many Australians do support better outcomes for Indigenous people.

So another response is to keep praying. When we don't know exactly what or how to pray, Paul urges us to rely on God's Spirit to intercede in groans too deep for words.

One prayer that we pray often as part of the Lord's Prayer is that God's kingdom would come amongst us, even as it is in heaven.

In the words of the psalm we read, God's kingdom is where love and faithfulness come together, where righteousness and peace kiss each other, when the Lord gives what is good, and our land yields its harvest.

This is the subversive hope of Mary as she sings about her yet-to-be-born child Jesus, who will lift up the lowly and feed the hungry, and bring rulers down from their thrones and send the rich away empty.

This is the imaginative hope of Jesus, who said that everyone, including the poor and lame, are invited to God's banquet.

This is the hope that despite setbacks and disappointments, God is still at work in the world to make all things new.

Let us hold a time of silence to reflect on what God's Spirit is saying to us

SONG [Creator God, you made this land \(Tune TiS #375\)](#)

This next song was written by an Aboriginal member of the Uniting and Aboriginal Islander Christian Congress of the Uniting Church ...

Creator God, you made this land
and gave to us the gift of life.
You wish that we should live as one,
but we acknowledge sin and strife.
Let justice everywhere be found,
let discord end and love abound.

Our Saviour Christ, you came to earth.
You know our joys, our hopes, our pain.
To call us into covenant,
you gave your life and rose again.
You make us yours, you give us worth
to be your light in all the earth.

Great Spirit in this ancient land,
speak in the stillness deep within.
Remove all prejudice and fear,
give life to all, new hope begin.
Then help us gently walk as friends,
while on this land your peace descends.

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