

# Learning from our indigenous brothers and sisters

Day of Mourning – 19 January, 2020

## INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

Next Saturday we celebrate **Australia Day** with the opportunity to get together with friends and family, perhaps around a BBQ and generally enjoy the peace and freedoms this great country has to offer ... unless of course you are an indigenous person with a very different understanding of this day ... where you are more likely to call the day **Invasion Day** or **Survival Day** ...

We are having a **Day of Mourning** service today as endorsed by the Assembly of the Uniting Church and as requested by our brothers and sisters in the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. Growing up in this country we were taught very little about its violent past and about the pain and hurt caused to indigenous people by the white settlers and colonisers. Massacres and murders of aboriginal people were common, driving people away from their traditional lands and taking their children were considered necessary practical steps in the development of the country ... for white people ... for our ancestors ... who simply moved in and took over the land.

This is our shared history ... and it's not good and it's not just. So today we have a day to reflect and a day to listen and learn from our indigenous brothers and sisters.

**Read:** [Micah 6:6–8](#) [Psalm 85:8–13](#) [John 14:15–17, 25–26](#)

This summer our news has been dominated by the terrible bushfires burning in nearly every state. These fires have been described using words such as massive, catastrophic, devastating and unprecedented. These images from space show the smoke plume is reaching well beyond NZ. This fire season has so far burnt an area of 10 million hectares, roughly the size of England and ten times more than the fires that burned in the Amazon last year.

The direct cause of most of the fires has been ignition from lightning, a naturally occurring part of our landscape. Depending who you listen to, the size and ferocity of the subsequent fires reflects the anticipated effects of **global warming** – with 2019 being the hottest and driest year ever recorded in Australia – or – the fires have no connection at all with global warming – because, as the argument goes, Australia has always had fires.

Both sides of this argument sound plausible, up to a point. Only people who disregard science can dispute that our climate is changing and becoming hotter, therefore increasing the frequency and intensity of fires – as we have experienced this year.

But surely Australia has always had fires? The simple answer is ‘yes’ – controlled burning has been part of indigenous land management for thousands of years. What has changed is the climate and European approaches to land management.

In his excellent book **Dark Emu**, Bruce Pascoe has collected an impressive collection of anecdotes and journal descriptions of what this country was like prior to European settlement from the early explorers. They each note that indigenous people – the First peoples – used fire extensively to shape the land. They burned small patches of land every five years or so to control the growth of key grasses and tuber plants that they depended on for food and which they stored in large stockpiles. This burning gave the landscape a park-like feel according to the early European explorers such as Thomas Mitchell who wrote: ‘We crossed a beautiful plain covered with shining verdure and ornamented with trees, which ... gave the country the appearance of an extensive park’.

Fires were very carefully controlled, were low intensity and only occurred at certain times of the year so as to not affect food production. And of course they occurred before the warming and drying effects caused by widespread burning of coal and other fossil fuels for the last 200 years.

Why am I sharing all this? First, to dispel the myth that indigenous people in this country were simple hunter-gatherers who never built permanent housing, never conducted any form of agriculture and never shaped the land for their own purposes. These are the sorts of myths we have been told about the First peoples in an effort to justify how our ancestors could so easily arrive and take over an empty land – the myth of **terra nullius**.

Second, in the face of such devastating fires this year, it seems we are repeating all the mistakes of earlier generations by assuming that **we** know the Australian landscape better than our indigenous brothers and sisters and that we have nothing to learn from them. If the use of fire was such an important tool to the indigenous people, surely there is much that we could learn from them ... if we took the time to really listen. Just this week, President of the Australian Academy of Science, Prof John Shine commented in relation to the bushfires that ‘we must draw on all the available evidence and knowledge, including working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and undertaking further research where it will have the most benefit’.

Turning to our readings for today, the well-known passage from **Micah 6** confronts us with a question of what God requires of us. According to this passage, even the most extravagant and heartfelt worship will not impress God unless our guiding attitude is one of doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God.

What might this look like in our relations with indigenous people?

- It might mean working cooperatively to address the huge gap in things like life expectancy, health, imprisonment rates, suicide and access to education between indigenous Australians and all other groups.
- It might mean listening seriously to the indigenous demand to have a voice in our Federal parliament, without dismissing the idea out of hand.
- It might mean changing the date and focus of Australia Day away from celebrations that remember the day white Europeans claimed this whole country as a colony for the kingdom of Great Britain.

- It might mean attempting to see the world through the eyes of aboriginal people and the daily rejections and racism that is directed their way ... and think whether this is the way we would wish to be treated ...

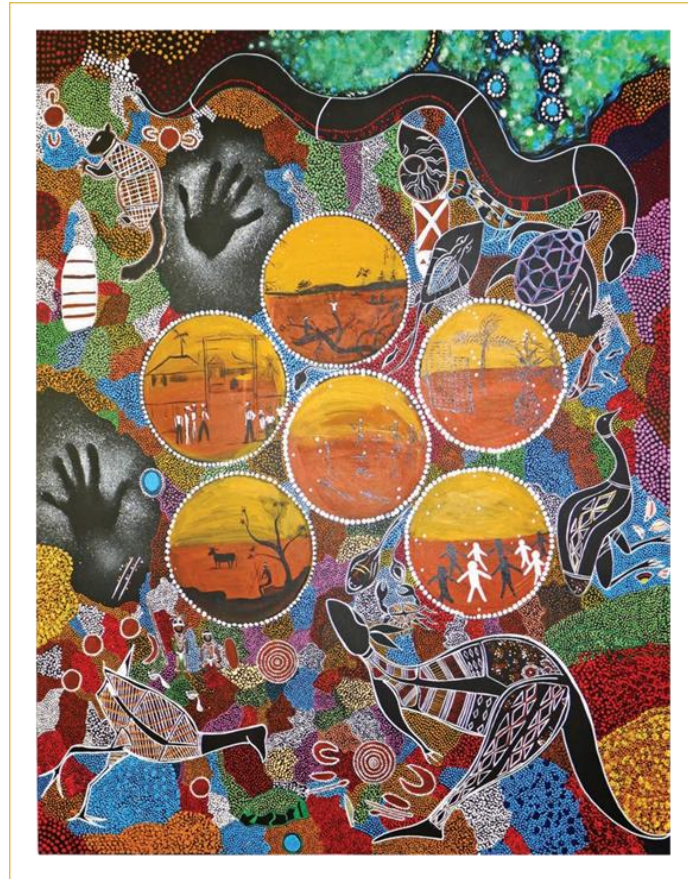
Our second brief reading from **John's Gospel** starts off in a similar way. If we really love Jesus we will keep his commands that include loving our neighbour and focusing on the weightier matters of the law such as justice and mercy. To help us along the way, Jesus says he will ask the Father to send another Helper, **the Spirit of truth**, who will dwell among us and within us forever. The Spirit will remind us of everything Jesus taught.

What truths might the Spirit speak to us today? One truth is that all people are created in God's image and that God plays no favourites ... all are acceptable to God. Another uncomfortable truth is that we live and worship on land that was stolen from aboriginal people and that as a nation we have tried to ignore and suppress the telling of this violent dispossession and takeover of the land. We have not been kind or loving towards aboriginal people.

In the last chapter of his book *Dark Emu*, Bruce Pascoe hints that the way forward for Australia is not to focus on the difference between **capitalism** and **communism** – or between conservative politics and progressive politics – but rather to focus and learn from the difference between capitalism and what he calls **aboriginalism**. He suggests that capitalism, for instance, has no way of persuading diverse communities and interests about the best way to manage the water from the Murray–Darling basin. We could perhaps add in climate change here – capitalism is dismally failing to get any real action.

Pascoe doesn't develop what aboriginalism can offer as a contrast except the evidence of the book that points again and again to the truth of our history that must be taught to every Australian, and that every Australian is equal – indigenous and non-indigenous alike – so that every Australian can contribute to and share in the natural, moral and economic flourishing of this country.

I want to try and paint a picture of how this disconnect between capitalism and aboriginalism has worked in the past as an illustration of how far we still have to move – together – into the future. This story is inspired by the painting below, depicting what happened in the Sunshine Coast hinterland not so very long ago.



Picture by Sammy Ray Jones depicting massacre at Murdering Creek in 1869

Look carefully at the smaller circular panels as you read on.

***White fella thinking goes like this ...***

This is good land ...

it could grow crops and support sheep and cattle ...

I want as much of this land for myself as possible ...

But the pesky aboriginals are a problem ...

Sometimes they come and take one of my animals ...

I know what to do ...

I'll gather my mates, lure the local aboriginals into a trap and blast the smithereens out of them...

If that doesn't work, I'll appeal to a higher authority – the government – and convince them that it's really in everyone's best interests if the aborigines are removed from this land and taken somewhere else ...

That's all they deserve ...

And look, now we can build a bigger and brighter future ... with skyscrapers and theme parks and imported tropical trees ...

***Meanwhile black fella or aboriginal thinking goes more like this ...***

This is good land ...

it's supported and nourished my people for generations ...

I want to continue to take care of this land for future generations ...

But the pesky white fellas are a problem ...

They're happy to share the land but won't share its provision ... like their animals ...

I know what to do ...

I'll talk to them and work out how we can share the land ...

They want us all to come ... so we'll go and make peace ...

Wait ... they're shooting us all and hunting us like wild animals and forcing us to flee far away from our land ...

What did we do to deserve this? ...

Surely there is a way where black fellas and white fellas can live together and enjoy the bounty of the land together ...

What's needed for this to happen ...?

Let us take few moments to sit in quietness and reflect on what we have heard today.