

Day of Mourning – 24 January, 2021

Today's liturgy comes from the Assembly of the Uniting Church
in conjunction with Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC)
and also from Common Grace

In honour of the Day of Mourning, prayers have been included with the
Message for you to share.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Our land is alive with the glory of God;
desert sands hum and gum trees dance.

Brown grasses sing
and mountains breathe their stillness.

All created things add their rhythms of delight
and even stones rap out their praise.

Let our voices mingle with those of the earth;
may our hearts join the beat of her joy,
for our triune God is with us:
the Source of all being surrounds and upholds us.

Christ Jesus walks beside and before us.

The Spirit moves within and among us.

Blessed be God, our wonder and delight.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

(based on Revised Preamble to UCA Constitution)

Today, as we gather to worship,
we acknowledge the Wurrundjeri people of the Kulin nation,
the first inhabitants of this place
from time beyond remembering.

We acknowledge that through this land,
God nurtured and sustained
the First Peoples of this country,
the Aboriginal and Islander peoples.

We honour them for their custodianship
of the land on which we gather today.

We acknowledge that the First Peoples
had already encountered the Creator God
before the arrival of the colonisers;
the Spirit was already in the land,
revealing God to the people
through law, custom and ceremony.

We acknowledge that the same love and grace
that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ
sustained the First Peoples
and gave them particular insights into God's ways;
and so we rejoice
in the reconciling purposes of God
found in the good news about Jesus Christ.

WELCOME

Today friends, we are remembering the at times tragic history of our nation
and the violent dispossession of her First Peoples.

Our indigenous brothers and sisters have asked us to mark this day as a Day
of Mourning. We will lament the truth of our shared history as we lift up to
God our prayers for First Peoples and our nation. We will say sorry and seek
God's forgiveness, healing and hope.

But today is also a day of worship. So we also come together and give thanks
to God for the abundant grace and liberating hope which we know through
Jesus Christ, which is for all people.

May the God of justice and peace be with us all.

OPENING PRAYER

Great Creator Spirit,

as we gather together, we acknowledge you as the Creator of all things.

We humble ourselves before you in prayer.

We pray for your forgiveness – as we acknowledge the lack
of relationship between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal peoples in this country.

We pray for your grace – as we acknowledge the times we allow our differences to separate us.

We pray for your courage – as we acknowledge ignorance, lack of education, lack of will and the racism that keeps us from the truth.

You are a God of love, and so we come together in community, at a time of division in the nation of Australia, seeking to be your hands and feet, so that together with you, we can change the heart of Australia, to see healing and hope for all peoples.

We long for your truth to set us free.

Lord, hear our prayer. Amen.

LAMENT AND CONFESSION

Merciful God,

we, the Second Peoples of this land, acknowledge and lament the injustice and abuse that has so often marked the treatment of the First Peoples of this land.

We acknowledge and lament the way in which their land was taken from them and their language, culture, law and spirituality despised and suppressed.

We acknowledge and lament the way in which the Christian church was so often not only complicit in this process but actively involved in it.

We acknowledge and lament that in our own time the injustice and abuse has continued.

We have been indifferent.

Liberating Jesus, hear our lament and by your Spirit bring healing, hope and transformation

to the lives of our First Nations sisters and brothers
and their communities, we pray.

Gracious God, hear our acknowledgements —
we have not loved you with our whole heart,
nor have we loved First Peoples
and other neighbours as ourselves.

God of mercy,
forgive us for our failures,
past and present,
and give us the grace today to make a fresh start.

By your Spirit
transform our minds and hearts
so that we may love as you have loved us,
that we may boldly speak your truth
and courageously do your will.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS

When we are empty, God fills us;
when we are disheartened, God is compassionate;
when we are wounded, God brings healing;
when we confess our sin, God forgives.
Hear the good news: through Christ, our sins are forgiven.
In Christ we find refuge, strength and hope.
Thanks be to God.

BIBLE READINGS

Amos 5:21–24

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Psalm 85:8–13 (responsively)

I will listen to what the Lord is saying,
**for he is speaking peace to his faithful people
and to those who turn their hearts to him.**
Truly, his salvation is very near to those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.
Mercy and truth have met together,
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.
Truth shall spring up from the earth,
and righteousness shall look down from heaven.
The Lord will indeed grant prosperity,
and our land will yield its increase.
Righteousness shall go before him,
and peace shall be a pathway for his feet.

John 8:31–36

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'

They answered him, 'We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?'

Jesus replied, 'Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it for ever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.'

MESSAGE Truth-telling

I find preparing a message for this Sunday each year to be both challenging and rewarding. It's challenging because as a white Second Nations person, I find it difficult to speak authentically from an indigenous perspective. But it's also rewarding as I research and reflect and learn more each year about the true history of our country.

This year I've taken the Bible readings and theme – **truth telling** – from material provided by Common Grace, an ecumenical group who describe themselves as a movement of people pursuing Jesus and justice. Part of the aim this morning is to uncover more of the truth of our history as a country – and the truth of our present – so that we might be freed from ignorance, prejudice and apathy and moved to positive action.

This matters because in the **post truth and fake news era** of Donald Trump, where conspiracy theories and lies carry equal weight with facts and truth, we risk abandoning truth for fantasy or whatever we may wish to be true. What did really happen in last year's presidential election and why did millions of Christian Americans vote for Trump? Where is the truth in this situation? It depends on who you listen to and where your political sympathies lie.



In our reading from John's Gospel, Jesus is arguing with his opponents, the Pharisees. Earlier in the chapter, Jesus claims to be the **light of the world** and to bring new understanding of God whom he called his Father. In our passage, Jesus urges all his hearers – both his followers and his opponents – to remain in his word, to hold onto his teaching – especially his teaching about God. If they abide in his teaching, they will **know the truth and the truth will set them free**. They will no longer be slaves but rather sons and daughters of God.



So what is the truth they will know and how will this set them free?

In the Gospel of John, the **truth** is that Jesus has come from God to reveal what God is like and to invite people into relationship with God who is our loving Father. Knowing Jesus the Son and knowing God leads to **life – true and abundant life** – that is available to everyone, starting here and now. This way of knowing God will free people to embrace life and free them from fear and ignorance.

The form of truth telling that we are doing today has a similar aim – knowing our nation’s history will free us to embrace our indigenous brothers and sisters in a way that brings life to the relationship and frees us from fear and ignorance. Where to begin?



1. We acknowledge the sovereign First Peoples of these lands and waters where we meet, the _____ Nation (of the _____ peoples).

We pay our respects to their elders past and present and to all descendants of this/these nations who have cared for this place since creation.

We also honour all other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples here today.

2. This land is God’s land and God’s Spirit dwells here. We acknowledge the _____ people, traditional custodians of this land under God.

We commit ourselves again to working for reconciliation in this land.



is one of 300 indigenous nations that make up indigenous Australia.

I wonder how many of these 300 nations you could name?

Each week at the start of the service I make a formal acknowledgment of **country** – that reminds us that we meet and worship on the lands of the Wurrundjeri people of the Kulin nation. What I don’t say is that the Kulin nation is a group of five indigenous clans in southern central Victoria (**map**) who share common language and culture. It

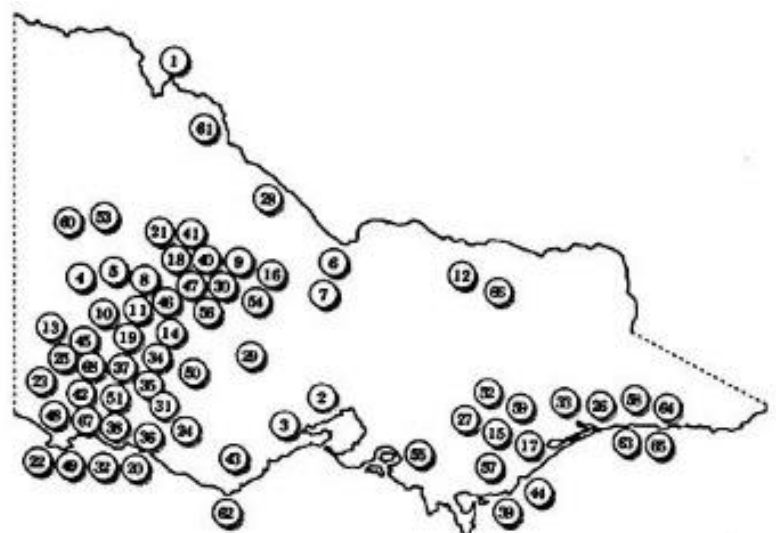


What we don't say is that these lands on which we meet are still owned and belong to the Wurrundjeri people – as they were never sold or ceded to European settlers. Nor were they **terra nullius** – empty land. To be more accurate – and closer to the truth – I could say that we meet on lands that were **taken** from the Wurrundjeri people in the mid 1800s. Or to be more provocative – and more truthful again – we meet on lands that were **stolen** from the Wurrundjeri people. I wonder how it would make us feel to be reminded each week that we worship on **stolen** land?

The truth is that we have stolen more than just land. We have also stolen ...

- **Water rights**, as colonial governments issued water rights only to recognised land owners. I was only made aware that this is an important issue by my brother-in-law who works extensively with indigenous groups in the Murray Darling basin ... who take their role as custodians of the lands **and waters**, and the creatures who live there, very seriously.
- We've also stolen children from indigenous families, the so-called **Stolen Generations**, and over decades, farmers and others have stolen **wages** from indigenous people.

Beyond taking the land and waters, our forebears also killed or murdered enormous numbers of indigenous people in the so-called **Frontier wars**. This map shows sites of massacres in Victoria over a 15 year period from 1836–1850. Such massacres are largely omitted from our versions of history as they are too inconvenient and confronting to discuss.



Massacre map, Victoria 1836-1850

So how did Christian people and churches so easily accept these killings and theft of land from indigenous peoples? History tells us that they did so because indigenous people were not seen as equal human beings, were not

considered to be made in the image of God, or as having a complex and valuable culture that was worth preserving. Indigenous people were not seen as having a place in God's purposes and – in European eyes – had not used the land productively as God intended.

We may regard such attitudes as prejudiced or just plain wrong, but they were the prevailing attitudes of European colonisers who saw themselves as more advanced and as racially superior to primitive black people.

As descendants of the European colonisers or as more recent arrivals to Australia, we might try to excuse ourselves from this history in one of three ways (**slide**):

1. Deny it ever happened this way. There was no destruction, no massacres
2. We didn't do it, so don't blame us. We weren't responsible.
3. It's ancient history. Let's forgive the perpetrators and move on.

But just for a moment try to see this from an indigenous perspective. Your history is one of invasion, violent dispossession, segregation and invisibility. How can you simply forget your history and move on?

Let's come back to Jesus for a minute. Jesus claimed that he was **the way, the truth and the life**. In part this means knowing the teachings of Jesus, who said that the greatest commandment was to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Through his ministry, Jesus demonstrated this love for neighbour by welcoming and restoring those on the margins of his culture – the outcast lepers, the rejected prostitutes, the excluded tax collectors and foreigners such as Roman officials.

So if the way to find life is to know the truth of Jesus and to walk in his ways, then as followers of Jesus we are called to **love** and **respect** our **neighbour**, which includes of course our **indigenous neighbour**. Our quick reflection on history shows that the early European settlers – including many who professed a Christian faith – neither loved nor respected their aboriginal neighbours. But I wonder whether we are doing much better today ...

Let me give you three brief examples from events of the past year.

First is the **Black Lives Matter** protests. This movement was instigated following the death of black man George Floyd in Minneapolis in May last year. The movement was a protest against ingrained racism and police brutality. Many people in the US, especially young people, whether black or white or every shade in between, participated in these protests.



In Australia, this movement focused on **black deaths in custody**, of which there have been over 400 since 1991, which is a national scandal. The sad fact is that **indigenous adults** are 15 times more likely to be arrested and imprisoned than other Australians. For indigenous children and

youth the statistics are even worse ... **indigenous youth** are 25 times more likely to be arrested and imprisoned. We struggle to comprehend the everyday racism endured by indigenous people because we are mostly white, privileged and viewed as responsible citizens. In surveys, one in five non-indigenous Australians would change seats on public transport if an indigenous person sat next to them or would watch indigenous people in a retail environment with suspicion. Aboriginal people endure such racial discrimination every day.



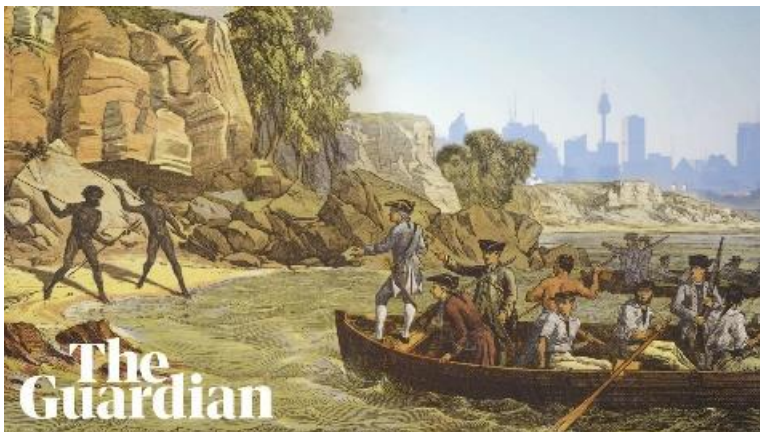
A second example was **Juukan Gorge** in the Pilbara that was blown up by mining company Rio Tinto in May, despite knowing that this gorge contained caves with signs and artefacts of continuous

human habitation dating back over 46,000 years. It was known to be a sacred site for the local indigenous people yet the company went ahead and blew it up anyway so it could expand one of its iron ore mines. Who gets to decide whether such mining developments go ahead? Whose rights are upheld? And do we grieve for this loss of culture in a similar way that some of us might have grieved when the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris burned down in 2019?

A similar struggle ended in a similar way in western Victoria last year when an ancient 'Directions Tree' was cut down so that extra lanes could be added to the Western highway near Ararat. Some trees have been preserved after a 10 year



legal battle but not this one. As one local indigenous person lamented, 'this beautiful tree is no longer with us. I am heartbroken. ... and then I was reminded that we don't matter to the colony.'



Example three was the 250th **celebration of the arrival of Captain Cook** on the east coast of Australia in 1770. Federal government initiatives focused on highlighting the geographic and scientific achievements of Cook's voyage while

downplaying his encounters and descriptions of indigenous people. The official government website notes that this celebration marks the year in which we – meaning indigenous and non-indigenous Australians – embarked on a shared journey. For the subsequent settlers, Australia was seen as young and free, a land full of promise and opportunity – a land of golden soil and wealth for toil according to the words of our national anthem.

But for indigenous people, the arrival of Captain Cook was a dark day that foreshadowed the times of death and dispossession to come.

I want to close with a poem written by indigenous poet Steven Oliver that was shared on an SBS documentary last year called 'Looky, looky, here comes Cooky'. It's a plea for understanding and empathy ...

**Steven Oliver poem on being a black fella (2020)
as spoken in 'Looky looky here comes Cooky'**

I'm a black fella
not a drunk criminal
uneducated, unemployed,
welfare dependent slack fella.
And if you try to tell me different
well you might just get a smack fella.
Not that I condone violence
I just don't condone silence.
And when you try to tell me
about what it means to be an "Aborigine"
with your stupid arse jokes
and your stereotypes
and Discovery Channel mentalities,
well I'm afraid I have to speak up
and let you know ... about me.
See I ain't what you see in your travel magazine,
and I haven't have the look from your history book ...
Noble? Maybe.
Savage? No.

Unless you're talking about my words in the way that they flow
but this isn't about style.
It's about attitudes.
If you stood by our sides
and simply just talked
and some of the times in our footsteps you walked.
Then maybe you'd see
we're not young and free.
We're ancient and chained
from the stains that remain from a past
that's never been dealt with properly
because people don't get off their arse.
Instead they'll read articles,
switch on the news and somehow through media
the lies become truth.

Just like when people see a drunk, black man
on the street and somehow from that
that man becomes me.

But the drunk white man who stumbles and falls
oh, he's not a reflection of a race at all.

So open your mind 'cos deceptions a lie.

Learn what it is to not see with your eyes
because I'm a black fella.

Not a drunk criminal,
uneducated, unemployed,
welfare dependent slack fella
and I'm trying to put your minds
on the right track fellas.

So question yourselves.

Challenge ideals.

Start a revolution.

Are you part of the country's problem
... or the solution?