

NAIDOC WEEK

Theme: Always Was, Always Will be, 18 November, 2020

Lodged out of place

During colonial history, race thinking *lodged* non-Western peoples globally “between animal and human” and concluded that “their lives are best administered under flexible governance produced by special emergency rules and exceptional ... laws”.

... Racism is something that structures our life.

... Racism is about the unequal treatment of a people on the basis of perceptions and economic, social, cultural and political logic, which always lurk at an unconscious and symbolic level (supra individual). It feeds the individual with racial discourse.

Paul Gilroy, Postcolonial melancholia.

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Lodged

The rain to the wind said,

‘You push and I’ll pelt.’

They so smote the garden bed

That the flowers actually knelt,

And lay lodged—though not dead.

I know how the flowers felt.

Robert Frost

Introduction

Always was, Always will be. This 2020 NAIDOC WEEK theme quietly yet proudly speaks of the resilience, survival and adaptability of Indigenous peoples. Over my many years of walking together with, at times working for many Indigenous peoples and their organisations – from 1996 to 2018 – I have been privileged to witness this.

They have not only adapted to Western culture, forcefully introduced into their many nations through colonisation, but now are partners with all the diverse peoples we now are to progress this nation; they now engage in every arena of public, business and professional life.

1. Lodged out of place

Yet, tragically, those who control power, who *have* the power, are cautious to progress the rights and real equality – treaty, sovereignty -, to truly share power with Indigenous peoples, nationally or locally. And the church, always a cautious and conservative organisation, indirectly supports such power, and itself keeps power from Indigenous peoples – for example, we hold funds assigned to them, and demand control of how it is used, a complex issue: and by conservative I mean conserving the current

system which supports mainstream social, cultural, economic and political arrangements.

The Rev Ken Sumner, former State Director, Victorian Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, a member of the Ngarrindjeri people of the lower Murray River, shared with the Victoria-Tasmania Uniting Church Synod that he experienced being “out of place”:

My sense of being “out of place” ... is that practicing covenanting requires a deeper re-cognition that, while it has produced respectful relationships, it has not really dealt with the many structural issues in Synod and settler-colonial society that greatly impacts on us; that we exist in unequal structural relationships.

I worked as Ken’s Resource person, or his Chief Operating Officer. He often shared with me his and his Peoples’ sense of *being lodged* into Western culture and structures without choice or shared power.

Robert Frost’s poem is expressive of Ken’s First Peoples being *lodged out of place*.

The rain to the wind said,
‘You push and I’ll pelt.’
They so smote the garden bed
That the flowers actually knelt,
And lay lodged—though not dead.
I know how the flowers felt.

The two powers of nature, the rain and wind, collude and batter the vulnerable flowers. Over these years I have come to learn how Indigenous peoples felt, as social and cultural powers battered them, or, equally, batters them by ignoring them; and many times I wept tears and agonised, helplessly, in my own powerlessness to bring change.

2. Our “seeing” the past and present is “out of place”

The *Black Lives Matter* movement in America offers evidence for us that in our Western societies racism and inequality has always bubbled away deep within society, at many levels.

Ken Sumner and I have sat for years attempting to understand this unconscious “bubbling” and its causes.

We came to the realisation that one of the core reasons is that Western society has never really critically reflected on, and addressed, how Indigenous people have been (mis)understood and viewed. That the powerful influence of 19th century Western thinking still exists. Paul Gilroy’s quote at the beginning is disturbing, as he suggests Western science and philosophy has created our views of Indigenous peoples as being primitive, childlike, and requiring Western control. And this means, they are viewed through this form of cultural “seeing”. It is not what they are, but what our “seeing” makes them.

As Ken and I reflected on this, we realised that the Uniting Church struggles to grasp how, unconsciously, in subtle ways, it still “sees” Indigenous people in this way.

It did not grasp this when it presented the Covenant statement in 1994 at its Assembly gathering. In this statement the Uniting Church confessed to Indigenous members:

“my people did not hear you ... we were closed to your spirituality and your wisdom... ... We grieve that the way in which our people often brought the Gospel to your people belittled and harmed much of your culture, and confused the Gospel with western ways.”

This confession recognised that churches did not hear or see Indigenous people as they lived their “truth”, in their own way.

But the church did not, and has not, fully recognised that it looked at others through its own cultural “eyes”, and that was the problem. That it only heard and saw Indigenous peoples with and through its own theological, cultural, political systems; which meant “being closed off”, being enclosed, and not hearing or respecting differences.

The church in the colonial period was so immersed in the truth and power of 19th and early 20th century European society that it did not see or value Indigenous culture, land or spirituality.

And because we have not owned this and the unequal power sharing, racism and exclusivism continues to bubble away.

3. Being lodged “out of place” continues! Our inaction allows it to continue!

The reality is that racism and unequal treatment remains in various forms. We still remain a settler colonial society. Elizabeth Strakosch in her book, *Neoliberal Indigenous Policy*, notes that the government has included Indigenous people but only in a neo-colonial contractual manner: they need to demonstrate their capacity to fulfil the contractual or the policies, set by mainstream standards, or they will exclude them from equal rights. Equality is not a starting point!

In 2016, as Ken and I were reviewing the North Regional Congress, we flew into communities and sat under trees and listened to stories of Indigenous peoples in remote northern communities. They were a proud people, still living out their ancient, sophisticated culture, law and spirituality. On one occasion, in Arnhem Land, people shared how large army helicopters descended on their community, and army doctors set up tents and started to take their children for checks as part of the 2007 Liberal Government Intervention in the NT. No forewarning! In fear and panic they took their children and disappeared into the land.

The 2007 Intervention in the NT was an example of this unequal treatment. And they never found any evidence of misconduct and no

explanation or apology followed. How can we allow such unequal treatment to continue? And it does continue!

4. Lodging ourselves “out of place” in the way of Jesus, for equality and justice for all!

The story in Mark 10:45-52 shares how Jesus challenged the way power was set up in his society; to upset the social and cultural structures, rules and power of his time, and this un-settling was the only way to heal blind Bartimaeus.

In that system, if this blind person touched another person, they too would be made unclean, impure. Then, you can't attend religious services.

He was invisible to them. Buried in the dust of his culture. He is stuck. His place is beside the road. Ability to offer Love to him was limited by his being structured “out of place”. His culture made him an outsider, with no way out!

This is why many in the crowd sternly commanded him to be silent. They are the conservers! Society wants to keep Bartimaeus in his place, and keep society comfortable and un-disturbed. Keep him invisible, out of place, in his marginal space. They were reminding him that he could not engage with a person of Jesus' higher class.

What does Jesus do? He contradicts the power and truths of society, with its fixed, loveless culture. He loves this other human being, which means? Relating to him as equal, his neighbour. Which means that Jesus challenges the ideal of honour, where equal can only meet equal, otherwise, the one who is higher on the social ladder is shamed.

Jesus humbles himself; accepts to meet him, challenging the class structure. In this act he offers Bartimaeus social equality and Jesus sacrifices his social power.

Contradicting his societies structure, Jesus is faithful to God's love for the world, and operates with the power of compassion, mercy and justice for all people, especially the poor and marginalized. Jesus had compassion for physical, social, economic, political & spiritual wellbeing.

Finally, what is profound is that Jesus invites Bartimaeus to be an active participant in his own transformation. When he asks “let me see again”, naming his extensive physical challenge, Jesus responds: “Go; your faith has made you well,” signaling that Bartimaeus's faith, not only Jesus' power, is an active factor in his healing. Jesus thus reveals to Bartimaeus his true place: a place of human finitude and creative power, the place of a created co-creator with God of his own life-experience and relationships. As he follows Jesus, will his disciples be able to allow him an equal space? You know the answer!

This story asks us to examine ourselves in our world: who is really blind, and who can truly see; see ourselves, how our society is unequally

structured? What does love of neighbour mean in our world? Who is my neighbour?

Always was, Always will be. This 2020 NAIDOC WEEK theme quietly yet proudly speaks of the resilience, survival and adaptability of Indigenous peoples. They are now partners to progress this nation with all the diverse peoples that we are. We are neighbours together! It is time for each of us to consider how we may further the progress of our Indigenous sisters and brothers for justice, equality; and how we will address the reality of racism and unequal treatment that remains in various forms, always bubbling away within our society.

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