

FROM THE INTERIM LEAD MINISTER

Reflection

Reconciliation Sunday, John 17: 1-11, 23 May, 2021

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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*.

(Professor of American and English Literature at King's College London)

Underlying inequalities and extra burdens of black communities

... these aren't normal times. You're being asked to find your way in a world in the middle of a devastating pandemic and a terrible recession. The timing is not ideal. And let's be honest — a disease like this just spotlights the underlying inequalities and extra burdens that black communities have historically had to deal with in this country. We see it in the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on our communities, just as we see it when a black man goes for a jog, and some folks feel like they can stop and question and shoot him if he doesn't submit to their questioning.

Injustice like this isn't new. What is new is that so much of your generation has woken up to the fact that the status quo needs fixing; that the old ways of doing things don't work; and that it doesn't matter how much money you make if everyone around you is hungry and sick; that our society and democracy only works when we think not just about ourselves, but about each other.

Former President Barack Obama

Part of an address at the ceremony

for graduates of historically black colleges and universities.

May 16, 2020

1. Structured “out of place”!

Colonial and contemporary history provides disturbing evidence that non-Western peoples, particularly Indigenous peoples globally, were both *viewed*, (“thought about”) and *structured* as a lower form of human species; and consequently, were treated unequally. Power set up unequally!

Paul Gilroy, in the first quote above, notes that they were “lodged” at a lower, inferior level, giving the superior human species, the Western nations, politicians, policy makers, philosophers and clergy, the right and power to place them under administration and governance.

Former President Obama shares an example in 2020 of this unequal burden and treatment when he said that “just as we see it when a black man goes for a jog, and some folks feel like they can stop and question and shoot him if he doesn't submit to their questioning.”

The anthropologist-historian Patrick Wolfe relates an example of this “being structured out of place”. He recounts that in 1896 two key colonial government officials, Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, made contact with the Arunta Aboriginal people in Central Australia. During this encounter, they witnessed the Arunta people’s ceremony around the conception of children. When they asked about conception they were given an ancient story, which was of a spiritual nature, framed in the complex Arunta spirituality. But in Spencer and Gillen’s British scientific understanding this answer showed that they were nescient: that is, “not knowing”, without knowledge of the biological nature of human birth. They concluded that this “nescience” confirmed that they were primitive, uneducated peoples. Then they concluded that Indigenous people were without knowledge and incapable of ownership and management of land.

Added to this, when Spencer became the Government Chief Protector of Indigenous people in the NT in 1911, he shaped policies based on this “nescience” discourse. Western scientific and political discourse saturated Indigenous identity and life with their “superior” notions, and decided how they should be assimilated. And, Indigenous public/political identity was and still continues to be constructed and written over with the advance of settler colonial society! Wolfe argues that this example illustrates how the relationship between anthropological theory and colonial power operates on the framing of political identity, with the result of unequally situating Indigenous people. And this filters down through the media and into everyday life in country towns and cities, with unequal effects and power imbalances.

2. Structure determines culture! Culture determines “seeing” unequally!

In the Covenant statement in 1994, at its Assembly gathering, 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.”

But this confession was dangerously limiting!

Or did we unconsciously believe we knew better, and more deeply, wanted to hold on to power and determine life? We see this within our Christian communities.

While this confession recognised that the church did not hear or see Indigenous people as they were in their “truth”, they did not reflect adequately on “what they were seeing with”. Western philosophy, anthropology, science! Power imbalances were unstated. On how Western structures and culture “lodged” Indigenous people at a lower, inferior level. How this gave authority, the right, and the power to nations, politicians, policy makers, philosophers and clergy, to “lodge” them under Western administration and governance. There has never been real advances of giving up power, of giving disadvantaged “others” power, and then living in a “shared-equal-power” existence at every level of life.

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.

The reality is that racism and unequal treatment remains in various forms in Australia. We still remain a settler colonial society. Elizabeth Strakosch in her book, *Neoliberal Indigenous Policy: Settler Colonialism and the 'Post-Welfare State*, 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 aspects of policies and agreements, set by mainstream standards, or they will exclude them from equal rights. The 2007 Intervention in the NT was an example of this unequal treatment.

3. What insights about cross-cultural negotiations do we receive from our scripture text, John 17: 1-11? Being re-imagined as ONE!

We overhear a prayer as Jesus prepares for the end of his life, words for his followers! Leaving a legacy for one's family or community was a common ancient ritual. William Loader suggests that John, on the basis of Jesus' life, creatively imagined "what Jesus might have said and what would have been the issues for him in this final prayer". It may have been influenced by the Jesus Prayer, what we call The Lord's Prayer.

At its core, the prayer conveys that Jesus came to bring life to all, equally, and to give his life. That at its deepest level God desires a loving relationship with humanity and earthly existence. In the prayer, Jesus models life with God and with each other. We are reimagined as ONE! UNITY! The different are invited to unity.

You see, there is worry in the voice of John's Jesus. Concern about disunity and division in John's communities, where different cultures were gathered. As God the Parent is one with Jesus the child of God, which is a relationship of love, Jesus prays that diverse humanity can have oneness in love, which seeks to address power imbalances and unequal power.

Jesus interprets that he and God are one: An intimate unity, companionship, and partnership shared with his wholly other Parent God, a unity between heaven and earth, the divine and the human. Yet, Jesus prayer evokes a unity in which extreme difference is brought into relationship and embraced by unconditional love.

And Jesus' prayer and desire is that his followers share in this unity in complexity and difference.

So, for John's Jesus, this prayer is a call to a divided church to work for unity and love as primary, and calls for the courage to respect and work with difference, to discern how we can be in true reconciliation with our Indigenous Peoples. And the Spirit of Truth and Reconciliation accompanies us in this spirituality process, to expose the darkness we inhabit into the light of newness.