

## The Sixth Sunday of Easter

### Priority: Engaging Anew with First Nations Peoples

(Acts 8:5-8, 14-17, Psalm 65:1-7, 16, 20, 1 Peter 3:15-18, John 14:15-21)

#### Introduction

In today's first reading, Philip goes down to the city of Samaria to proclaim the Messiah to them. The result is "great joy in that city." If the Gospel is not good news, then the Gospel hasn't been preached. If the acceptance of the Gospel doesn't result in great joy, then the Gospel hasn't been received. Sadly, throughout history, the preaching of the Gospel has often been mixed up with political power. The good news that would set the captives free came with a new political power that would create a new kind of captivity. This tension can be recognised in Australian history and is addressed by the Archbishop's fifth apostolic priority: engaging anew with First Nations Peoples.

#### Archbishop Mark writes:

The injustice done to First Nations peoples in this country is a running sore at the heart of the nation. It is contemporary Australia's original sin... We need a genuinely new engagement of the Church with the First Nations peoples, especially in an Archdiocese like this where the Indigenous presence is strong. A new engagement will mean, first of all, listening to Indigenous voices, and believing that we can learn if we really listen. In the past, non-Indigenous Australia has struggled to believe that we could learn anything from First Nations peoples. They could learn from us, but not we from them. That has to change, both in the Church and in Australia more generally. Then the listening and learning need to lead to action.

#### 1. The Spirit of Truth

In the Gospel reading, Jesus promises to send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who will always be with us and is the Spirit of truth. It is the Holy Spirit that leads us to the truth about God and ourselves. Any meaningful engagement with First Nations Peoples must begin with the truth. Indeed, the concept of Truth Telling is a key strategy of Reconciliation Australia. Truth telling means the "process of openly sharing historical truths after periods of conflict to allow societies to move forward in a more inclusive way, based on justice and human rights."<sup>1</sup> So let's begin with some truth telling.

The 1788 arrival of the First Fleet resulted in cautious friendships being formed between the First Australians and the British Empire. Within three years, relations soured as settlers spread out across the land. Researchers now estimate that more than 10,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were killed in 403 massacres.<sup>2</sup> Beyond this, the introduction of new diseases and the forceful acquisition of First Nations lands caused the deaths of many more.

In 1901 when the Commonwealth of Australia formed, Indigenous Australians were excluded from the census and from the lawmaking powers of the Commonwealth Parliament. The White Australia Policy excluded First Nations Peoples from voting, pensions, employment in post offices and maternity allowance.<sup>3</sup> It was not until 1962 that First Nations people were granted the right to vote, and it was 1967 when First Nations peoples were counted on the Australian census.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.firstpeoplesvic.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/tt-faqs.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-03-16/aboriginal-people-genocidal-killings-massacre-map-nt-wa/100913106>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/timeline-indigenous-rights-movement/fb5nvvdsu>

This appalling history of the mistreatment of First Nations Peoples continues to impact First Nations Peoples. According to a 2021 survey, 52.1% of First Nations people surveyed reported "experiencing at least one form of major discrimination, such as unfairly being denied a job or unfairly discouraged from continuing education."<sup>4</sup> Today, child mortality is at twice the rate compared with non-First Nations children. About 1 in 4 First Nations students in Years 5, 7 and 9 remain below national minimum standards for reading. In 2018-19, around 34 percent of First Nations youth aged 20-24 had not attained Year 12 or equivalent. Just over half of all young people in detention on an average night in June 2019 were First Nations Australians.<sup>5</sup>

On February 13, 2008, then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said, "we apologise for the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians."<sup>6</sup>

## **2. The Spirit of Love**

In the Gospel reading Jesus says, "if you love me, you will keep my commandments." When Jesus was asked the most important commandment he replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ... and you "shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt 22:34 – 40). To love is to work for the good of the other. The first fruit of the Holy Spirit listed by St Paul is love! The Spirit of God is the Spirit of truth and love.

Love is a verb – it's a doing word – it requires action. St Paul says, "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Cor 13:6-7). In this light, a new engagement with First Nations Peoples and the work of reconciliation are essential to the Church's mission. We are not free to stand aside whilst our First Nations' sisters and brothers are disadvantaged. St Mary MacKillop reminds us, "never see a need without doing something about it." We are called to engage anew – to love – to listen, and to do all we can to bring true reconciliation in our nation.

## **Conclusion**

The history of mistreatment of First Nations Peoples in Australia is sobering. Against the backdrop of these difficult facts, there are signs of hope, and the Church is getting involved. The Uluru Statement, endorsed by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, states, "Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: the coming together after a struggle. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination." The Archdiocese of Brisbane has adopted a Reconciliation Action Plan. Let us consider how we might contribute to this ministry of reconciliation as we now take a moment to pray.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://inclusive-australia.s3.amazonaws.com/files/Inclusive-Australia-2020-21-Social-Inclusion-Index-min.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.worldvision.com.au/global-issues/work-we-do/supporting-indigenous-australia/8-interesting-facts-about-indigenous-australia>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.aph.gov.au/Visit\\_Parliament/Art/Exhibitions/Custom\\_Media/Apology\\_to\\_Australias\\_Indigenous\\_Peoples](https://www.aph.gov.au/Visit_Parliament/Art/Exhibitions/Custom_Media/Apology_to_Australias_Indigenous_Peoples)

## **Prayer for Reconciliation**

God of all creation,

as we journey together in this Great Southern Land,

we pray for healing, forgiveness and unity,

creating a path of good will, with justice and compassion.

Jesus, through the power of your love, you have given us the courage, wisdom and strength to share our gifts and talents in humility.

In peace and understanding we reconcile with each other.

Creator Spirit, we come together in prayer and thanksgiving for the many blessings we have received. Allow your Spirit to wash over us and give us strength to walk together as one.<sup>7</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> This Reconciliation Church prayer was written by a small group of Aboriginal Elder women and Reconciliation Church staff members in 2014. It can be found here, <https://www.catholicreligious.org.au/news/2019/7/9/journeying-together-a-prayer-for-reconciliation> .