

A NAIDOC WEEK REFLECTION¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, 3 July 2022

On Friday, when I discovered that the rector had COVID and that I would be preaching this morning, I turned my mind to considering what we might usefully say in this church at the start of NAIDOC Week, when we celebrate and recognise the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We stand on unceded land belonging to the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and it is entirely appropriate that we should acknowledge and pay proper respect to their elders, past, present and emerging. As far as I know, no Gadigal people are with us this morning. Whatever this plot of land might have meant to them has been totally swept away by us, its spiritual significance no longer apparent.

The reality of that was captured by the poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal:

What if you came back now
To our new world, the city roaring
There on the old peaceful camping place
Of your red fires along the quiet water,
How you would wonder
At towering stone gunyas high in air
Immense, incredible;
Planes in the sky over, swarms of cars
Like things frantic in flight.²

The Gadigal people do appear by name in the glass artwork in the baptistry, itself the product of Wiradjuri artist Nikki McCarthy. Elsewhere, First Nations people appear on our walls principally as killers, along with one friend.

I know that the parish is working hard at reconciliation, as we should. A plan is being prepared that will assist us in that necessary process. Nevertheless, it is not appropriate for me this morning to celebrate, in their absence, what we have destroyed.

Instead, I decided to take this morning's readings and reflect on how they might help us to examine ourselves as actors in the drama of contemporary Australia. Our government has made it clear that we will, at some point, be called on to approve or reject a constitutional amendment to recognise First Nation people. We do not yet know the terms of the question to be put to us, but the government

¹ Readings: 2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:7-18; Luke 10:1-12, 17-24

² [Understand Old One - Understand Old One Poem by Oodgeroo Noonuccal \(poemhunter.com\)](https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/understand-old-one/)

has stated its acceptance of the Uluru Statement from the Heart.³ That statement suggests the creation of a Voice to comment on proposed legislation. We know how hard it is to amend the Australian constitution. We have approved only eight amendments out of 44 attempts since 1901. This history implies that any attempt must have bipartisan support.

We are all familiar with the story of Naaman, the Aramean general who suffered from leprosy, a generic biblical term for any kind of skin disease. Aram was a large, powerful kingdom covering most of present-day Syria, Lebanon, southern Turkey and East towards Iraq. Its capital was present-day Damascus.

His story carries signs of how the rich and powerful conduct business. Naaman wouldn't have heeded the Hebrew slave girl, but he did respond to his wife's nagging. He used the power of his king to pressure the king of Israel to find a cure. No wonder the king of Israel was worried. He was already a vassal of Aram. Was this the next step in taking full control?

Elisha comes to the king's rescue and Naaman goes to see him. But Elisha doesn't see him, sending a message by his servant. If Naaman had relished the shock that he had given to the king of Israel, he now became angry on two fronts. In the first place, Elisha had not given him the respect that he thought he deserved. Second, Elisha commanded him to bathe in some paltry local river. Surely, the rivers of his home, Abana and Pharpar, were much better. He could have been cured without the trouble of his long journey.

If nothing else, the story of Naaman is an exercise in the futility of conducting affairs through the exercise of power. None of Naaman's power secured that which he desperately sought. Only by surrendering his power, could he be cured. Even though he considered himself powerful, he was still subject to manipulation by others; first, by his wife, and second, by his servants who played on his vanity. Despite his presumed power, he was weak.

Hidden within Naaman's reactions was his prejudice. He no doubt thought that everything he did was justified. Yet, his preference for his local rivers hid a contempt for Israel and all it stood for.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul reminds his readers that we reap what we sow. In particular, he said, "If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh." Although in this part of his letter he urges the Galatians to support the ministry of the church, his comments have a wider significance. As Tom Wright says:

³ [View The Statement - Uluru Statement from the Heart](#)

... behaviour functions like farming: God has decreed that if you sow barley, barley is what will come up, and that if you sow nettles, nettles are what will come up.⁴

Australia's colonising project was essentially a work of the flesh. It was intended to prevent the French from gaining control of the continent, as well as ridding the home country of unwanted humans. If riches could be extracted from the continent, all the better. The project was based on the concept of *terra nullius*; that the country belonged to nobody and was there for the taking.⁵ The writing of our history suppressed the fact that the occupation was met with resistance from skilful warriors with strong strategic and tactical abilities but ultimately without the resources necessary for success.⁶ We might imagine a parallel with the current war in Ukraine if that country did not have the support of international friends.

The *terra nullius* doctrine was famously overturned in the High Court Mabo decision, but not until 1992.⁷ In the meantime, the dispossession that we had sown began to bear fruit in the form of the "Gap" that the nation is trying, with only limited success, to close.⁸ I cannot here go into the details of what the deprivation produced. I do note, however, that the way out lies in the restoration of power and control to the dispossessed.

If we turn to this morning's gospel, we find Jesus sending out his disciples. He instructs them how to behave when they enter a village. If they are not welcomed, they should leave. Jesus says that, in the kingdom, it "will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town".

There can be no doubt that Jesus is here making a significant threat against the towns that will not receive his seventy disciples. When you think about it, the promised punishment seems pretty severe for being rude to some scruffy itinerant evangelists. Genesis records that Sodom, along with its sister city Gomorrah, was destroyed by fire and sulphur.⁹

But what, exactly, was Sodom's sin? The English language has enshrined that sin as homosexuality, hence the word 'sodomy'. That view has always been prevalent and persists, as our current disputes over sexuality show. The biblical story is that the inhabitants of Sodom threatened homosexual rape against two

⁴ Wright, Tom. *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (New Testament for Everyone) London, SPCK, 2002, p. 79

⁵ [Terra nullius - Wikipedia](#)

⁶ [Australian frontier wars - Wikipedia](#)

⁷ [Mabo v Queensland \(No 2\) \("Mabo case"\) \[1992\] HCA 23; \(1992\) 175 CLR 1 \(3 June 1992\) \(austlii.edu.au\)](#)

⁸ [Close the Gap \(2022\) | Australian Human Rights Commission](#)

⁹ Genesis 19:24.

visitors to the house of Abraham's nephew, Lot. He protected the two visitors because, he said, 'They have come under the shelter of my roof.'¹⁰ .

Many commentators argue that the sin of the people of Sodom was not the homosexual rape that they threatened but the offence that they offered to the law of hospitality.¹¹ The people of Sodom breached that law in an exceptionally violent and degrading fashion. That was how Jesus understood the story.

Henri Nouwen has commented:

In our world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbours, friends and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found. Although many, we might also say most, strangers in this world become easily the victim of a fearful hostility, it is possible for men and women and obligatory for Christians to offer an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings.¹²

The last word goes to Oodgeroo Noonuccal:

Look up, my people,
The dawn is breaking
The world is waking
To a bright new day
When none defame us
No restriction tame us
Nor colour shame us
Nor sneer dismay.

Now brood no more
On the years behind you
The hope assigned you
Shall the past replace
When a juster justice
Grown wise and stronger
Points the bone no longer
At a darker race.

So long we waited
Bound and frustrated
Till hate be hated
And caste deposed
Now light shall guide us
No goal denied us

¹⁰ Genesis 19:1-11.

¹¹ See Michael Vasey, *Strangers and Friends*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1995, p. 125;

¹² Nouwen, p. 63.

And all doors open
That long were closed.

See plain the promise
Dark freedom-lover!
Night's nearly over
And though long the climb
New rights will greet us
New mateship meet us
And joy complete us
In our new Dream Time.

To our fathers' fathers
The pain, the sorrow;
To our children's children
the glad tomorrow. ¹³