

BRAND NEW DAY

Sermon to Saint James King Street
Reverend Hazel Davies Vocational Deacon
12 February 2023
Matthew 5:17-37

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable and pleasing in your sight LORD my rock and my redeemer.

I begin by acknowledging the Gadigal peoples of the Eora Nation on whose land we meet. I acknowledge their elders past, present and emerging and any other First Nations People here present.

I would also like to acknowledge the elders past, present and emerging of this community of faith called Saint James – those who birthed and continue to nurture this sacred space. Thank you for inviting me into your pulpit today. God willing, I hope to join in fellowship on the road to Conciliation by presenting a Making Peasce Yarning Circle after my return from Alice Springs and beyond.

I am but one of the keepers of the rising story of Making Peasce. This is a movement of the people for the rightful and perpetual memorial of the Frontier Wars and massacres of Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal peoples. It is a movement to acknowledge what happened during the colonial settlement of this nation.

I and others have been walking this story road along with mentoring elders for 10 years. The name of this road is forgiveness.

Amongst my First Nations friends is Aunty Bev O'callaghan, a central Arrernte woman of the Todd River, who tells a contemporary dreaming story called The Legend of the Desert Pea. This lamentation embeds the ancient dreaming blood flower signal of the Desert Pea into a wandji wandji (or song or story with no boss). Aunty Bev wishes this story to be a gift to the whole nation. Bev and I have a covenant to make this happen.

The story tells of the coming of the white fella with guns, and the bloodshed and sorrow of the massacres. In this story, the Great Spirit weeps along with the ancestors, and the land grows ill and arid. The ancestors' weeping is so great that the tears flood the land and, where the blood was shed, the red pea rises as a sign and symbol that the ancestors will never be forgotten.

I am a white woman of British heritage born and bred on Dharawal land near Appin where the first sanctioned massacres took place in 1816. Like many of us, I discovered later in life, and well after my formal education, that tragic fragments of our true history – from settlement onwards – lay buried under a somewhat apocryphal narrative. This prevented us from knowing the more disquieting aspects of our combined history.

We know things are changing. This is a great time of hope on these good lands that we now call Australia, for that which was hidden and prised away from our national birth stories is

now bubbling to the surface. On many fronts, we are a nation in search of integrity; of righteous action towards the other – to our neighbor. This is also a challenging moment for us. It will involve change and some difficult decisions that may seem unsettling, but I believe there are signs that we are growing up as a nation.

These signs are especially felt as we move towards an Indigenous Voice to Parliament that will hopefully be enshrined in our constitution. We are at last adjusting those tall ship sails of 1788 in order to strike a better line that speaks a higher truth about our national identity. By doing this, we can move forward together and heal. And the world is watching us.

I was recently in conversation with a visiting Islamic scholar. He put the question, ‘How can we, as Australians, welcome and embrace those from across the sea?’ (‘For those who’ve come across the seas, we’ve boundless plains to share.’) He continued: ‘How can we do this when they, who have resided on these lands as the oldest continuing culture and who have lost land, life and limb, are still struggling to find their way home?’ These questions are especially true for the disenfranchised young ones running amuck and lost through the streets of Alice Springs at night. We could add infinitely to these images, with national statistics of generational trauma that is present in our First Peoples.

As we come to our gospel reading today, may I put a question to you? Why are you here? It's a gorgeous Sydney summer day out there. I am sure there are a million things you could be doing. Why are you and I here?

There could be as many reasons for coming to Saint James this morning as there are individuals before me. Deep down the bedrock of why you and I are here is, I believe, the fact that we want to live a whole life – a search for authenticity. We want to live a life that is not split, not divided. We want to live a life that has integrity, that makes sense for us in the context of our ever changing, rushing world. We come to this beautiful place to center ourselves, and to stop and listen interiorly for a word (spoken or unspoken) that might call us back to ourselves and to our Creator.

Maybe the familiar rhythms and colors of these sacred liturgies are for us a kind of coming home.

And authenticity is waiting to greet us here in the words of today’s gospel reading.

Right now, here in this place and at this moment, we are in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. These words are a wonderful message that Jesus gives to his audience and that Matthew places in chapters five to seven of his gospel. Jesus goes up the mountain at the beginning of chapter five and descends at the end of chapter seven.

This is a tough reading. At first glance, it appears that Jesus is raising the bar so high that none of us would have a hope of making the grade in the Kingdom of Heaven. The common refrain is: ‘You have heard it said ... But now I say to you’ ...

‘You have heard it said ... Do not murder and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment... But now I say to you, anyone who is angry with another will be subject to judgment’. One might consider that not committing murder is entirely do-able; but who has not harbored hurt or disdain for another?

Luther held that the law's impossible standards drive us to grace. Like prodigals at the end of ourselves, we rise up to return to the Father, who, by the way, is already on the road to our rescue. We are beggars – there's truth in that.

But dig a little deeper. What if Jesus is us calling us back to ourselves – to live as whole people – to live authentically? We are reminded that authenticity is not a solo journey. It involves being able to see the face of the other: our neighbour.

The Pharisees are on the receiving end in the background of this treatise. They had long ago lost sight of themselves. Their religious practices had become incompatible with a living faith. They had gradually substituted that faith for a system of mechanical worship and rules by which they were enabled to believe that they might serve God and Mammon. They were so ingenious, so tough, so inflexible and so torturous that they were able to make a show of holding apart the indivisible forces of the human soul.

The Pharisees had removed their sacred heart of flesh and replaced it with one of stone – no longer shepherds of the people. Jesus referred to them as 'blind guides, broods of vipers and white washed tombs'. Jesus aimed front and center at their inner hypocrisy. They were, in his eyes, an epic failure. He also places their shortcomings on public display. They are held up as the perfect example of what NOT to do. The outside did not match the inside. Unlike the Pharisees, we are to see to it that our holiness permeates the inside and the outside.

Miriam Ungunmerr Bauman calls our nation to enter into a time of deep listening to our national heart beat. Westernized society is not conducive to listening. We may have to relearn. Bauman says: 'You just don't listen on the outside, you listen on the inside.' Also, from the Benedictine tradition, we are asked to 'listen with the ear of our heart'.

Those who settled here from afar were unable to hear or see that the inside did not match the outside. They came across the sea to these bounteous lands and took, at will, what was not theirs to take.

Eleanor Dark in her book *A Timeless Land*, puts it this way:

'Under a foundational Judeo-Christian Law they (the colonial settlers) were able to say devoutly in one section "Thou shalt not kill", while from another they were able to make plausible justifications for massacre. They were able to proclaim, "Blessed are the poor in Spirit" and bend all energies to the building of power and dominion, able to extol mercy and be merciless. To preach kindness but be brutal. To praise truth and practice deceit and yet still be able to regard their society with sincere complacency. A dissociated mind and heart that enabled the belief that they might serve God and Mammon'.

Those voices of the past are silent now. They are not our voices. We were not alive during those times but our voices are not silent, and neither are the voices of our First Peoples. The truth is that you and I live ('and move, and have our being') on the back of this history. An additional truth is that many, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, paid the ultimate sacrifice.

We are on a journey back towards one another and it may well be a severe mercy. When our interior actions and attitudes of love and acceptance, together with our hearing and seeing the other in trust and grace, when these actions and attitudes are presented to God, then there is a transformation of our thinking and of our behaviour.

We have witnessed this recently in the 'about face' of the Australian National War Memorial, who, under the weight of public opinion, have agreed to include the truth of Colonial Era Conflicts on our own soil in their (our) collection. This action reflects the invitation that Jesus is giving us in today's gospel: to walk uprightly before God, receive his grace in failure at the foot of the cross, and begin afresh each new day. We, as a nation, are entering this brand new day.

There's an old desert fathers saying that goes like this: 'When do you know the night has passed and the new day has come?' The answer: 'when you can see the face of another'. And so the night has passed and a new day is opening before us. Let us look for the faces in our lost history. Let us live and pray with one heart and mind.

I would like to close with the voices of two of our own living desert fathers in the heart of our nation who are calling us to listen deeply. Both are senior mentors and guides for Making Peace.

Peltherre Agnilinga Agkmoura (Chris Tomlins), an Arrernte Elder from Snake Gully near Mbantua Alice Springs, says:

'We are all "stolen generation". My people's land, lives and culture have been stolen. But for you settler mob something equally precious has been stolen from you – the truth. We are all a stolen generation'.

As we walk forward together, we need to build a 'golden generation', especially for our emerging youth who, through education and learning to understand our full history, can be equipped to lead us into a future, where respect is for all ... those here first, and those who arrived here later. To do this, we need to go right back to the beginning – to the taking and the killing. Then, we can go from there.

In the past, it's all been secret; but now it must come out so that we can learn and heal together.

From Warlpiri elder, Jampijinpa Ned Hargraves, from Warlpiri in the central Western Tanami desert:

'I open this statement with my language: Karrin - Jarla - Moowa – Jarri. This powerful phrase is used when someone breaks the law and betrays what is sacred. It means this must never happen again. These are also the words we use for what Jesus said on the cross – "Karrinjarla muwa-jarri! It is finished!" '

Closing Prayer

Almighty God, the voices of the Colonial Era Conflicts on our land have lain silent; voices in the wind of the massacre sites have been stifled. Abel's voice has been expunged from our history.

We realise now that these prodigal pods of the past will not nourish us for the future. Wise Father, you are calling us all home.

To Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks better than Abel's voice ever did.

Amen.