

## Some reflections for Reconciliation Sunday 26 May 2019 by Peter Russell

### John 5:1-9 (NRSV)

5:1 After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

5:2 Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes.

5:3 In these lay many invalids - blind, lame, and paralysed.

5:5 One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years.

5:6 When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?"

5:7 The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me."

5:8 Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk."

5:9 At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath.

Here was a sick person who had lain at the pool of healing in sight of all and known to many **over 38 years!** But none had helped him. So close but so far. To me he calls to mind Aboriginal people who have waited, and waited, and waited, and waited! It is no wonder Aboriginal people from all parts of Australia despair.

For many years, in fact from the time of the invasion, Aboriginal people have been placed in an invidious situation. With settlement by the colonisers came not only dispossession of land and the decline of languages and culture but also the introduction of diseases like smallpox from which the local inhabitants had no built up immunity. The result was devastating. For example, the Kurna population who had no prior direct contact with Europeans had been decimated before Europeans arrived here. The disease had travelled overland. Kurna numbers were such that the arrivals in 1836 saw most of the country as uninhabited.

Lewis O'Brien, *When the Clock Struck Thirteen: The Life and thoughts of Kurna Elder Uncle Lewis Yerloburka O'Brien as told to Mary-Anne Gale*, Wakefield Press, 2007

Highly Recommended

- also relates how land was given by the government and then taken away from the family.

Since the time of colonisation Aboriginal people have been playing catch-up. We live on with a disgraceful situation with regard to our First Nations peoples. From the latest Closing the Gap report in February 2019 - nearly all the targets indicate very little progress or none at all.

While child mortality figures have improved along with Year 12 attainment, all the others, including school attendance, literacy and numeracy, employment and life expectancy are not doing well. Life expectancy is still around 10 years less than the rest of the population. (10.6 for males and 9.5 for females - ABS 2013 latest figures available)

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/life-expectancy-death/deaths/contents/life-expectancy>

In addition we continue to have appalling stats on imprisonment. Aboriginal people are massively overrepresented in the criminal justice system of Australia. They represent only 3% of the total population, yet more than 28% of Australia's prison population are Aboriginal people. And every year it has been getting worse.

Aboriginal prison rates - Creative Spirits, retrieved from

<https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/law/aboriginal-prison-rates>

The government persists in a top down model of "we know what is best" and lip service is paid to consultation. It has been shown many times that where Aboriginal people are given self-determination, the skills and the resources to solve their own problems much is accomplished. However real listening to what Aboriginal people want is mostly sidelined.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-10-21/bellar-indigenous-sovereignty/5032294>

For example, Aboriginal people gathered at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention, coming from all points of the southern sky, had travelled to Uluru and invested their heartfelt desires gained from years of experiences in their communities to make this statement to the people of Australia, *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*. It was not even given consideration by the government. Its intentions were even misrepresented but large corporations BHP and Rio Tinto have welcomed the statement and support its "voice to government" as does the Uniting Church.

<https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/nitv-news/article/2019/01/31/bhp-and-rio-tinto-show-support-indigenous-voice-parliament>  
<https://assembly.uca.org.au/news/item/2735-a-dead-hand-on-the-heart>

The founder of the Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, an independent part of the Uniting Church, and its first president, Rev Charles Harris, said, "**Aboriginal people are looking for the practicality of the Gospel that will reach my people and pull them up.**"

<http://www.congress.org.au/belief/believe1.php>

Congress is committed to and believes in a practical and wholistic gospel. This means, in their words:

- Development of an Aboriginal Theology/Spirituality.
- Rebuilding our people's lives.
- Sharing the Good News in our people's own language and in ways that are culturally appropriate.
- Addressing the real social, political and spiritual experiences of our people.

That also means things like, *housing, employment, training, community development, alcohol rehabilitation, land rights, health and youth work.*

<http://www.congress.org.au/belief/believe2.php>

So many things crowd into our lives that it is easy not to notice some things. Jesus noticed the man who had been ignored by everyone else and he listened to his story. The Uniting Church has noticed Aboriginal people, and has listened and heard their stories. It has responded with the Covenanting Statement in 1985 and has committed to walk with Aboriginal people, side by side, in partnership. It has further listened and heard and added a Preamble to the Constitution in 1994 which states in part - "As the Church believes God guided it into union so it believes that God is calling it to continually seek a renewal of its life as a community of First Peoples and of Second Peoples from many lands". It acknowledges and supports *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*. It knows that much more needs to be done and it is not easy. But the *Walking Together as First and Second Peoples Circle* encourages members of the UCA to see a destiny together, praying and working together for a fuller expression of our reconciliation in Jesus Christ so that together we may contribute to a more just church and nation.

<https://uniting.church/walkingtogether/>

Consider now what you might do.