

# A Destiny Together

## Justice for First Peoples

# Daily Prayers and Reflections for a Week of Prayer and Fasting

## DAY ONE: THE INJUSTICE OF DISPOSSESSION

**Read** Revelation 21:1, 3-4

### Listen

Contrary to the belief of the invaders that they had a divine right to take possession of this land as their own, the God of righteousness, truth and justice has sustained us with the belief that one day we would be recognised as the true stewards of this land.

Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress,  
*Response to the Covenanting Statement*, 1994<sup>1</sup>

### Reflect

The relationship between peoples and their land is a major theme in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Genesis creation stories we read that human beings were created by God to have an interdependent relationship with the land and all creatures. That God takes the initiative through hearing, seeing and acting for those who are dispossessed and devalued is a strong and recurring promise and hope throughout the development of God's covenant with the people from Moses to Revelation.

It is not a stretch to say that the many injustices suffered by First Peoples began with a lie about the land. *Terra Nullius* (a Latin phrase meaning 'land belonging to no-one') was the myth that emboldened Europeans to colonise the land as if no one was present. Aboriginal peoples who had a relationship with the land that went back tens of thousands of years had their land stolen from them; communities were forced away without any consideration or care for how central this relationship was to peoples' wellbeing. Australia's founding document, the Constitution, was written in the context of *terra nullius* and so makes no mention of the original inhabitants and caretakers of this land.

### Pray

- Give thanks to God for the sacred gift of the land.
- Confess the human misuse of land and the ongoing history of dispossession of indigenous peoples from their lands, often in the pursuit of profit.
- Pray that all Australians will one day recognise the deep and abiding connection to the land of First Peoples.

<sup>1</sup> Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (1994). *Response to the Covenanting Statement*. Available: <http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/justice-for-indigenous-australians/uca-statements/item/493-uaicc-response-to-the-covenanting-statement>



## DAY TWO: THE COST OF RACISM

**Read** Galatians 3:23-29

### Listen

[My mother] went on to tell me about her own fears when she was raising me and my siblings: the absolute terror she felt when she had to collect food vouchers, of some nameless person swooping in to take us kids off her because she was facing hardship after my father passed away. The tremble in her voice as she recounted this broke my heart...

When the poor white woman across the road – in exactly the same boat I am and with the exact same monetary issues – does not have the extra burden and worry of people turning up on her doorstep to question her parenting, then that initiative walks like a racist duck, and quacks like a racist duck.

Kelly Briggs, 21 January 2014<sup>2</sup>

### Reflect

Central to our Christian faith is a vision of life which calls us to a way of being and living in the world that respects every person as made in the image of God. Jesus Christ showed us that we have a responsibility to recognise and embrace the differences between and among human beings. The early church, in response to Christ's call, broke through the barriers of race, culture, class, gender and even faith. Racism is a sin because it denies the image of God in humankind.

It is racism that sees people excluded, insulted and belittled because of the colour of their skin or their cultural heritage. It is racism which dehumanises entire groups of people and so allows us to tolerate, or even be blind to, the exclusion and sufferings of too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders – children still removed from their parents in large numbers, high unemployment, poor health, low retention rates at school, limited home ownership, and discrimination in the housing market. These things are not simply unjust, and are not simply a failure to love our neighbours.

As Christians, we are called to see all people through the eyes of Jesus Christ – to see every person as a child of God, the God who loves each one of us without distinction. We are called to follow and live out God's will for reconciliation in the world, exposing and breaking down the barriers that divide us from each other.

### Pray

- Give thanks to God that Jesus, through his words and his actions, brought God's love to us all and that he reached out to share that love with all who were excluded and marginalised in society.
- Pray that God's love might overcome the fear that hardens people's hearts against those who they regard as different.
- Pray that Australians might work together to overcome the racism that we are all too often blind to because it is so entrenched in our culture.

<sup>2</sup> 'Aboriginal mothers like me still fear that our children could be taken away' (2014, 21 January). *The Guardian*. Available: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/21/aboriginal-mothers-like-me-still-fear-that-our-children-could-be-taken-away>



## DAY THREE: DIGNITY DENIED – THE LOSS OF HEALTH AND WELLBEING

**Read** Luke 6:17-26

### Listen

It is not acceptable for indigenous people to have to tell their children that, despite the wealth and resources available in this shared land, their lives will be shorter than their non-Aboriginal friends, their health and education will be that of a Third World country.

Patrick Dodson, 2005<sup>3</sup>

### Reflect

By any measure, Australia is a nation of unequal opportunity. The gap in health and wellbeing between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians is a stark demonstration of the inequities that exist in our country. One of the most shocking comparisons is that of infant mortality rates (the number of infant deaths per 1000 live births). Aboriginal communities suffer an infant mortality rate about twice as high as that of the non-Aboriginal population. In the Northern Territory it is three times as high.<sup>4</sup> In education, the differences are also disturbing. Only about 37 per cent of Aboriginal students complete Year 12 compared to 74 per cent of other Australians. One of the most telling (and often quoted) statistics remains life expectancy with Aboriginal Australians living on average 20 years less than other Australians.

The Uniting Church believes that “every person is precious and entitled to live with dignity because they are God’s children.”<sup>5</sup> Situations which deny people dignity are therefore contrary to God’s will for us. Jesus challenged systems and structures—religious, social and political—which oppressed and marginalised people. In Luke’s gospel, the healing stories are connected to the teachings of Jesus about how in the kingdom of God, those who are ‘least’, the ‘last’ in society—the poor, the sick, the excluded—will be the first in God’s house. Christians are called to be a sign of this promise, here and now. We have a special responsibility to work together for a society where all people can flourish.

### Pray

- Pray that God’s spirit of hope moves among us that we might be renewed in our commitment to work together for a country where all people can flourish.
- Pray for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that they may know we recognise their struggle for equity and stand beside them.
- Pray for ourselves that we might not be satisfied with the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians and be moved to join the struggle for justice in this land.

<sup>3</sup> Dodson, P. (2005, 1 June). A nation dispossessed. *The Age*. Available: <http://www.theage.com.au/news/Opinion/A-nation-dispossessed/2005/05/31/1117305615673.html>

<sup>4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010). Measures of Australia’s Progress 2010. Available: [http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/health-facts/overviews/mortality](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1370.0~2010~Chapter~Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20peoples%20(4.1.7.2) and Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet (2013). Mortality. Available: <a href=)

<sup>5</sup> Uniting Church in Australia (2006). *Dignity in Humanity: A Uniting Church statement on human rights*. Available: <http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/human-rights/uca-statements/item/484-dignity-in-humanity-a-uniting-church-statement-on-human-rights>



## DAY FOUR: LOSING LANGUAGE

**Read** Acts 2:5-13

### Listen

Language is central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. The two are intertwined. Language describes cultural attachment to place, cultural heritage items, and puts meaning within the many cultural activities that people do. Furthermore, language plays a fundamental part in binding communities together as a culture, and individuals to each other in a society. Wesley Enoch, Director of the Queensland Theatre Company and a Nunukul Nuggi man, has said that “the loss of language is the loss of the ability to describe the landscape... and your place in it.”

National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples, 2012<sup>6</sup>

### Reflect

When the Spirit of God touched the crowd in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, it was through the miracle of language that people understood that there was something extraordinary happening. It was not, however, that the linguistically diverse crowd all heard the same language – they each heard in their own language. Whatever else this passage says to us, it points to the idea that linguistic diversity is a gift from God. It is certainly the case that when dominant cultures do not value the languages of minority groups, it impacts negatively on people’s sense of identity. It also diminishes the richness of human culture for us all.

Language and culture are intrinsically intertwined and we know from the histories of indigenous peoples around the world that the maintenance of language and culture is one of the most significant factors in people’s health and wellbeing.

In 2012, the Parliamentary Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities presented some significant findings including the following:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who speak indigenous languages have markedly better physical and mental health; are more likely to be employed; and are less likely to abuse alcohol or be charged by the police;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 13-17 year olds in urban and regional areas are substantially more likely to attend school if they speak an Indigenous language; and
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who speak, understand or learn an Indigenous language are more likely to gain a post-school qualification.<sup>7</sup>

### Pray

- Give thanks to God for the richness of the diversity of human culture and language.
- Pray that as a society we might come to value the diversity of languages as a most significant part of human life that must be protected.
- Pray that Australian society and public policy might respect, uphold and protect indigenous languages.

<sup>6</sup> National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples (2012). Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous Communities, p.2. Available: <https://senate.aph.gov.au/submissions/comitees/viewdocument.aspx?id=9ea8f621-f378-4b52-a2ce-4b20d968afee>

<sup>7</sup> Statistics quoted in: Office of the Arts, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2012), Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities, p.2. Available: <https://senate.aph.gov.au/submissions/comitees/viewdocument.aspx?id=2a3ff7ed-2363-4ef5-96db-cd32d4986bfd>



## DAY FIVE: THE 'STRONGER FUTURES' LEGISLATION

**Read** Luke 18:1-8

### Listen

Under the Intervention we lost our rights as human beings, as Australian citizens, as the First Peoples of this land. Through harsh changes we have had removed from us all control over our communities and our lives. We have been left with nothing. The legislation under which we now live does not comply with international law. It is discriminatory. We are no longer equal to other Australians. We are no longer equal to you.

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, Rev. Dr Djinyini Gondarra, Harry Nelson, Miriam Rose  
Ungunmerr-Baumann, Djapirri Mununggirritj, Dhanggal Gurruwiwi,  
George Gaymarani Pascoe

### Reflect

In the parable of the widow and the unjust judge, Jesus makes the point, twice, that the judge did not 'fear' God or respect people. The judge ignored a widow's pleas for justice and only dealt with her case to save himself further trouble. Widows were particularly vulnerable in Jesus' society, discriminated against in many ways, so it is no accident that Jesus chose the widow to represent all those who long for justice and respect. The point Jesus makes is that God's justice is for all without discrimination and that God's promise is that justice will be delivered.

Even in Jesus' time, non-discrimination and equality before the law was an ideal to be aspired to. Now, they are among the most basic principles in law and in the protection of human rights. These principles create an obligation on the Australian Government to ensure that every person is able to exercise their rights without discrimination.

The Stronger Futures legislation is a series of Bills that extend the Northern Territory Emergency Response Act 2007 (the Intervention), which expired in mid-2012. The stated aims of the legislation are about overcoming the disadvantage suffered by people in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory but many of the solutions the legislation has imposed on people (without genuine consultation and partnership) are unsupported by the evidence. They are also punitive in nature, taking a law enforcement approach which strips responsibility from families and communities for their own lives and imposes the same 'solution' on every community without regard for differences. Too many Aboriginal people under the law of Stronger Futures are still waiting, like the widow, for respect and justice.

### Pray

- Give thanks that we have the hope of God's promise that justice will prevail for all who suffer marginalisation and ongoing injustice.
- Pray that we might always remember that, as Christians, we are called to seek justice for those in need.
- Pray that God would grant us wisdom and courage to exercise the responsibility we have to hold our law-makers to account for unjust and discriminatory laws.



## DAY SIX: HEALTHY COMMUNITIES AND SELF-DETERMINATION

**Read** Isaiah 58:3-9

### Listen

Ultimately, I want to see our communities organise themselves in ways that they choose, in accordance with the principles of good governance and in ways that ensure our most vulnerable, our elders, our women and our children, and not just the strong alone, are being heard in our communities and organisations.

I want these structures to be recognised and respected by governments, built on relationships of mutual respect and good faith, and I want community and government engagement to take place at a more localised level... When we connect with the communities where our people live, and when we empower these communities to exercise self-determination built on mutual trust and respect, real and long-lasting change becomes more than a dream.

Mick Gooda, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2013<sup>8</sup>

### Reflect

During a week of fasting, the rebuke of the Prophet Isaiah might strike us with more force than at other times. The Israelites had been begging God to end their sufferings. They wondered why it was that when they worshipped so often and so correctly, God remained far from them. The response delivered by the prophet was a devastatingly harsh rebuke: while injustice, inequity and oppression thrived in their society, their worship was empty and meaningless.

The way we organise ourselves as human societies matters to God. When the systems and structures we construct serve to damage and exclude people, when they fail to offer sustenance and shelter to those who live in poverty, then our worship becomes hollow. Faithful worship includes building just and healthy societies.

We know from experiences around the world, that the building of healthy and flourishing communities does not happen when externally devised solutions are imposed on people. It is vitally important that people have the freedom to determine for themselves the solutions to their problems and access to appropriate resources and support to help bring those solutions to life. This is important for all of us, and especially important for indigenous peoples.<sup>9</sup>

### Pray

- Give thanks to God for the gifts of human community; for the meaning and purpose we find in relationship with God, with others and with the natural world.
- Pray that the right to self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders be recognised by all Australian governments.
- Pray that laws and policies support first and foremost the building of healthy communities in all cities, towns, regions and remote places across Australia.

<sup>8</sup> Gooda, M. (2013). Recognising our rights, relationships & responsibilities: Native Title and Social Justice Report. Available: <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/news/stories/recognising-our-rights-relationships-responsibilities-native-title-and-social-justice>

<sup>9</sup> This has been recognised in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Article 3 says that because of the right to self-determination, indigenous peoples around the world have the right to freely "pursue their economic, social and cultural development" (<http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples-1>). Australia has endorsed this Declaration.



## DAY SEVEN: THE TIME FOR CONSTITUTIONAL RECOGNITION

**Read** Romans 12:9-21

### Listen

This is to gain recognition for my people and me as an individual, as a person. This is so I can be recognised and I want my children's future and my nieces and nephews, my grandchildren and my cousins and brothers and sisters to be recognised; and to be able to put this issue to bed once and for all: that we are here, we are the First People and we are custodians and we have a sense of connection to this land.

Candace Champion (member of Salisbury Uniting Church, South Australia)  
January 2014<sup>10</sup>

### Reflect

Pauls' Letter to the Romans contains many passages about the call of God on the faithful to live in harmony together. Above all else, we are to extend love to each other. We are to offer 'mutual affection' not only to our friends but also to our enemies, and a part of that love, is about honouring each other and living in 'harmony' together.

As long as Australia's Constitution makes no mention that before Europeans arrived, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples had lived on this land for more than 50,000 years, then as a nation, we are failing to honour each other. In 2000, the Uniting Church in Australia Assembly first called for the recognition of First Peoples in the Constitution.

For our country, just as it has been for our Church,<sup>11</sup> recognising Australia's First Peoples in the Constitution would be a significant step towards a stronger relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, a step for building a relationship "based on truth, justice and trust".<sup>12</sup>

### Pray

- Pray that our politicians maintain cross-party support for constitutional recognition and demonstrate leadership on this issue as we move towards a referendum.
- Pray that as sisters and brothers in Christ, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members of the Uniting Church, we might continue to grow in our covenantal relationship together, building trust, respect and understanding.
- Pray that all Australians may come to understand that constitutional recognition is another vitally important step in our continued growth as a country where all people can flourish.

Rev. Elenie Poulos

<sup>10</sup> Uniting Church in Australia Assembly (2014). Candace talks about Constitutional Recognition [video file]. Available: <https://vimeo.com/84560634>.

<sup>11</sup> The Uniting Church in Australia adopted a new Preamble to its Constitution in 2009 to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the First Peoples of this land and the dispossession and violence that they have suffered for so long.

<sup>12</sup> Rev. Prof. Andrew Dutney, President of the Uniting Church in Australia, quoted in: Uniting Church in Australia Assembly (2012, 28 November). Aboriginal Recognition Act first step to Constitutional change [media release]. Available: <http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/justice-for-indigenous-australians/news/item/885-aboriginal-recognition-act-first-step-to-constitutional-change>

