

A Destiny Together

Justice for First Peoples

Justice and reconciliation: together in Jesus Christ

A Theological Reflection

Why do we, as Christians, find ourselves called to pursue justice for First Peoples in this country? What has this act of solidarity with Christian brothers and sisters to do with the good news of Jesus Christ?

In the beginning of Genesis we are told that God created space and opportunity for life; that all life is connected and inescapably bound together -- even human beings from the dust of the earth. It is meant to be a space of beauty, belonging, inclusiveness, care and life with God. It is a space of grace in which human beings have custodianship rather than ownership; a place of respectful hospitality for all. It is a space where God is creator and we are creatures who find life in each other and in God.

A central affirmation in the story of creation is the claim that human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). In the days when this passage was written, 'to bear the image of God' meant representing God and sharing with God in the care of the world. Kings and rulers claimed that they alone bore that image. This passage challenges that claim and says that it is the human community as a whole, and every single person who is made in God's image.

When we allow the image in some to be harmed then the image in ourselves is lessened. Christians pursue justice not simply because of claims about human rights and equality but because injustice denies the reflection of God in people. Injustice is an abuse of human dignity and destroys individuals and community as well our own capacity to reflect the life of God.

When God brought the people out of slavery in Egypt and into a new space for life, their flourishing depended on how they cared for the poor, the widows and orphans; on leaders who cared for the people rather than just their own interests; and on restoration every now and again so that some relative equality existed in the land. The prophets continually called people back to this life, insisting that because God had brought them out of slavery they were to be a community of freedom and equality and care. As Micah says: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8). It is this vision of faithful life that Jesus demonstrated in his words and deeds and in his very being.

Jesus offers an extraordinary hospitality, a welcome into the presence of God, for those excluded by illness, race, morality, poverty or geography. For Jesus a flourishing life is about life lived with God and in the midst of a community that cares for all. He says that the two central commands that are to shape the life of disciples are that we are to love God with our whole life and to love our neighbours as we wish to be loved ourselves (Mark 12: 28-34).



In Corinthians we read that the Eucharist is to be celebrated in ways that honour the poor (1 Cor. 11: 17-34), and in Galatians we are told that this new Christian community should have no space for divisions based on gender, race or class (3:28).

There are many reasons why people cannot achieve the sort of flourishing life that is portrayed in the Scriptures – some personal, and some to do with the structures and systems and history of the society in which they live. If the good news about Jesus is to be ‘good’ news it must offer people the capacity to live an abundant life. The call on the church is to witness to and struggle for that life.

As a church we are called to embody in our lives and to point towards God’s great dream of reconciliation and renewal of life. Paragraph 3 of the Uniting Church in Australia’s Basis of Union says that

The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit...confesses that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity. God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The Church’s call is to serve that end...

This is the reason we share the story of Jesus and call people to discipleship – that they might be reconciled in and through Christ. This is why we pursue justice – so that injustice and division can be named and overcome, and people can be reconciled. This is why the Uniting Church seeks to be a peace-making church, a Church opposed to racism and prejudice, a community without division and distinction – as a sign and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which God desires for the whole creation.

The central and most ancient affirmation of the Church is that ‘Jesus is Lord’. This is an affirmation that Jesus is Lord of my life and that I owe my salvation and very being to him, and that he is Lord of the whole creation. We all belong to Christ, and we cannot harm or claim control over the lives others. When we honour Christ as Lord we live without false distinctions or hierarchies. Racism is one of the most destructive of these false distinctions. It denies the freedom and equality of all before Christ.

While it is hard to acknowledge, the fact is that underlying much injustice in this country is racism; Aboriginal people experience it on almost a daily basis. What Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience in housing, education, employment, imprisonment rates, early deaths, and ongoing injustice like ‘Stronger Futures’ laws (previously known as the Northern Territory Intervention) is not just injustice but racism. It is racism because as a community we would not tolerate these things if they were happening to non-Aboriginal people. It is a racism that Christians who believe all people are made in God’s image, and who confess that Jesus is Lord of all creation, should oppose as actively as we can.

Your participation in this week of prayer and fasting is one way you can respond to these injustices as an act of love for your neighbour and an affirmation that ‘Jesus is Lord’. Together we can contribute to the sort of justice which Mick Dodson, scholar and Aboriginal activist, speaks of:

Social justice is what faces you when you get up in the morning. It is awakening in a house with an adequate water supply, cooking facilities and sanitation. It is the ability to nourish your children and send them to a school where their education not only equips them for employment but reinforces their knowledge of and appreciation of their culture. It is the prospect of genuine employment and good health; a life of choices and opportunity, free from discrimination. (1994)

Rev. Dr Chris Budden

