ST GEORGES CATHEDRAL PERTH

EVENSONG 7 JUNE 2015 – premiere of the evening canticles in Noongar

*Read these Bible passages first: Amos 5.10-15, Luke 10.25-37*

ONE WHITEFELLA ON RECONCILIATION ROAD

I am Ian Robinson, Uniting chaplain at the University of Western Australia, until recently a co-convenor of the Stolen Generations Alliance in WA and executive member nationally, a member of the UCA Covenanting Commission with Uncle Sealin Garlett. I am also a desert traveller and some other things.

KAYA. I ACKNOWLEDGE that we meet on WHADJUK Noongar Boodja, I respect the leadership of ELDERS past and present AND I acknowledge THOSE WHO WERE REMOVED AND HAVE NOT FOUND THEIR WAY HOME. I am one whitefulla on Reconciliation Road with you, since you have welcomed me. I have been given the name Kulbarrdi, the magpie, meaning black and white together.

Let’s begin with a joke. A priest, a pastor and a rabbi walked into a bar, the bar tender said: ‘what is this, some kind of a joke?’ That’s where we are tonight.

And I have second joke, since that one wasn’t very good. Cecil Madigan was a geologist who explored the so called "trackless areas" of the red dunes of Central Australia. He named the [Simpson Desert](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simpson_Desert) in 1939 after a major expedition to be the first to cross it. Here is the joke – it already had a name, Mungathirri, and its custodians had been crossing it back and forth for millennia. An even bigger joke – he named that vast red sandy desert after the washing machine manufacturer! What ridiculous fantasies controlled the minds of the heroic coloniser! That too is where we are tonight. Ok that wasn’t very funny either.

Right now I am thrilled to hear the ancient canticles of the bible given voice in an even more ancient tongue. I hear the songs of the maaman and yorga, the sap of the Yorgum trees and the flow of the river Debarl Yerrigan. How right it feels that Noongar culture finds its proper place of leadership in worship in this cathedral on this spirited land, even with skeletons in the closet of this contested place. How good that this is not a token event for this cathedral but yet another step along reconciliation road, another defiant act of community leadership.

Why do I walk Reconciliation Road?

I am a Robinson; we were WA ‘first fleeters’. “Robinson Road” appears in just about every town. My ancestors were land-grabbers in several places. (I have been able to express my family’s sorrow about that to elders from two of those places.) As ‘pioneering stock’, it would have been natural to have kept on the white blindfold, hung on to my educated-white-male privileges, and hidden my shame under moral judgements about who are “the worthy poor”. I could easily have stayed impatient about ‘the right way to get things done’, according to MY culture, reassured my own western rationalism, and as so often happens justified the settlers’ use of force-of-arms. But I didn’t, somehow.

Somehow I heard on the wind of the Spirit the voice of Amos - how God judges things that are legal but immoral: “You people hate anyone who challenges injustice and speaks the whole truth in court. You have oppressed the poor and robbed them of their grain.” Sounds like dispossession to me. Sounds like endless Royal Commissions with no actual change.

God hears the last sigh of those Aboriginal persons who utter that sigh in prison, those who cannot give the love of their own children because they never knew any themselves, those who give up trying because the comments against their skin are too many per day. Yes, things are not as bad as they were. No they are not nearly all right, not even close. We must continue to construct the road differently.

Somehow I came to follow Jesus Christ when he told a story back to a lawyer who wanted to justify himself. The Collard case is a recent example. Jesus confronts those who use legal powers to avoid doing the right thing. This cathedral is the perfect location for hearing this post-colonial story.

The story is “the Good Samaritan”, the most radical piece of literature on the planet. In the wake of this moral tale, shorter than the Gettysburg Address, followers of Jesus have historically germinated schools, universities, healthcare, laws, arts, technology and science for the common good (more about this on Sept 4). Neighbourhoods have become communities of respect instead of bastions of the powerful. That’s its moral message and its track record, much of which we take for granted.

But there is a political message too. The hero of the story is ethnically Samaritan. In those days, the Samaritans were enemies of Jesus’ Jewish race. They were, after the Babylonian exile, the original land holders who had been displaced by the incomers. Spite and retribution had peppered the centuries until their mutual animosity in Jesus’ day was a given. Yet to the Judean lawyer Jesus chose to say that the man who gets religion right is a Samaritan. You could almost hear the crowd suck in the air. Jesus does this several times that we know of. Samaritans, we can say, were then the indigenous persons.

Jesus confronts racism by leaping the common prejudice and making Samaritans a source of pride. He finds in them *a model* of his own faith. Are you hearing me? Can you hear the ANGER OF Jesus AND Amos against prejudicial law that wounds and scars, against social attitudes that entrench ‘boofhead’ sense of superiority.

Can you, like me, hear Jesus’ ringing call to change and live in God’s ways? To end this nonsense with grace mercy and justice, and walk together.

Part of us says ‘yes’ to this, and part of us still says ‘no’. What is stopping us?

There is a deep cultural story here. The novelist David Malouf in his ABC Boyer Lectures chronicles the way that settlers arrived in Australian with a dream to make the British Empire as great as Rome. That’s one side of the equation. The Romano-British Empire back then also owed its values in part to the long-standing Christian influence towards the common good (as I have already described). That was the other side of the equation, so easily taken for granted. However, the Christian elements were themselves recruited for colonial purposes, with brutal consequences – those who followed Jesus were exiled. Then Christianity became sidelined, and then privatized, so that Christians no longer know what they can do. Now we are popularly trivialised and we deserve it. But more importantly from this loss, now only Rome is left to rule. What is that bringing? Prime Minister Abbott is more Roman than Catholic.

I call upon all people with a shred of decency to stop talking about “issues and concerns” and to learn *all over again* like Jesus to affirm and celebrate and listen to the oldest living culture on the planet. Step out onto Reconciliation Road with many others. Find your way.

It can be so different. I have felt the difference. On Sorry Day last May 26 a couple of thousand people together at Wellington Square felt *the way we should be*. It is a joyous thing. What is more, I have learned to hear from the Spirit in the land - my heart has tuned to the spirituality that animates and beautifies Creation (Proverbs 8). I have witnessed the most extraordinary grace in my elders and seen what Jesus is like when he is not imprisoned in the institutional church. If Eldership (*NT Gk: presbuteroi*) is a key concept of biblical leadership, then all bishops and elders and clergy and deacons here present – don’t think what *you can do for* aboriginal communities as though you are governors - take note where your next set of *lessons needs to come FROM*, as though you are disciples.

I am learning to see to the heart of a culture that is rich in family values, acceptance, listening, spirituality and knowledge systems so sophisticated that I know I have barely begun to grasp. In one culture I have a PhD, but in walking reconciliation road I can barely read.

It can be so different. I have gained a great life in Australia, as most of us have. A great life. What would I have been if my maternal grandparents had stayed on the east-end docks of London? Going further, I love to take people out to the deserts of Australia. They find it to be a majestic and intensely searching land. Its silence can roar. Fantastic gifts. At first it is painful to admit it is stolen land, [Repeat after me: “this is stolen land”]: *With* stolen children *and* stolen wages *and* bulging prisons *and* too many youth found dead. On and on it goes with token responses and symbolic gestures. We claim we don’t know what to do? Did you know that Aboriginal people are the most researched people on the planet, both anthropologically and legally – studies, reports and Royal Commissions by the thousand, very few of which have made it to the light of policy. Tonight I make two policy demands.

First, I call upon the government under Mr Barnett to appoint in WA, as in NSW, an Aboriginal Ombudsman with powers to enforce all the findings of all the reports on all the acts of destruction that colonists have visited upon a magnificent culture **and continue to do so**. An *Aboriginal Ombudsman.*

Secondly, I call upon all government departments to stop harping on about *disadvantage* – focussing therefore on housing, jobs, services, education – and realise that you must talk also about *personal and trans-generational trauma*. For me to understand something of these circles and layers, I have had to shift my patronising mindset.

Let’s not treat this as an "aboriginal issue". To do so is to assert our privilege yet again and thereby we give ourselves the option to walk away. When I say the final amen in a minute, please resolve with me that you will *never* walk away. This is about all of us and where we are.

This is from my heart, a Christ-following, Samaritan-loving, Amos-trembling, Aboriginal-walking, Australia-loving, justice-joyful little Robinson. I am just one whitefulla on Reconciliation Road, and in the name of the Great Spirit I both warn and invite you to follow the elders and others and the big guy that I am following along a road that is as joyous as these Noongar canticles.

In the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit, Amen