

# Walking on Bundjalung Country

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 28 May 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Ms Katy Gerner

Easter 7A

Acts 1: 6-14; John 17: 1-11;

Contemporary Reading: “*Son of Mine*” (to Denis) by Kath Walker.

This reflection (together with PowerPoint images) can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

---

For a long time, I wished I could go on a pilgrimage like the Camino de Santiago. I watched the movie ‘*The Way*’; I read about people who had made the trip. I envied their spiritual experience: the way they used it to make peace with their past. But I knew I wasn’t physically able to walk those distances.

However, I had an epiphany while walking around a labyrinth at a workshop organised by the Australian Christian Meditation Community, that I was already on a pilgrimage. This is a very special labyrinth. It was set at the beginning of time – and works all the way out to where we are now. It was very special to me. The labyrinth showed me that I was already on a pilgrimage. I had started my spiritual journey and it would take me on many paths that I could physically manage. I learnt to meditate, I did a mindfulness course, I went on the Murray Darling Basin tour which I spoke about here some months ago. But my latest pilgrimage - and the one I found closest to making peace with the past - was the ‘*Walking on Bundjalung Country*’ tour.

‘*Walking on Bundjalung Country*’ was an invitation from the Bundjalung members of Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress ACT/NSW to visit their country in the northern rivers region of NSW. You can see the map – which shows the names of the different towns that we went to, in English and the different Aboriginal languages. The trip included visiting:

- Indigenous church services – three in one day (and two of them were Pentecostal, so we were exhausted).
- A cultural tour in the Saltwater National Park where we learnt which plants could be used to sleep on or to eat or to avoid or how to make a knife for flaking. If you look at this scene, you can see:
  - the bracken at the front – and bracken is very nice to sleep on, if you’re into outdoor sleeping.
  - There’s a Taro plant right at the front. Well, it looks like a Taro plant, but it actually isn’t! It’s deadly poisonous – and some of the white settlers thought it was Taro and dug it up – and it did terrible things to their stomach lining! So, if you see them in the bush, don’t touch it.

- The long thin branches are full of water, so you can just cut through them if you're thirsty.
- Now this was a knife we were shown how to make on the tour. This knife is used for flaking, if you're flaking fish. They explained that you can take rocks and smash them in certain ways to make all sorts of different knives with different uses.
- The former Kinchela Aboriginal Boys' Training Home which is now the Benelong Haven Family Rehabilitation Centre. That's some of the dormitories where the families stay when they're going to rehabilitation.
- The Ngulingah Local Aboriginal Land Council. That's just one of the beautiful paintings that they have. The inside is full of beautiful paintings as well.
- This is Cabbage Tree Island – and the local school that they have there. If you think you can see rain, yes, it was raining extremely heavily, so we didn't actually get to meet any of the children because they were all sent home because of the floods. This is their school song and also the song of their Elders.
- Another important thing that we saw was one of the Ngulingah Local Aboriginal Land Council's projects – which is about restoring biodiversity and traditional knowledge around the Nimbin Rocks. This is one of the Park Rangers. He loves his work and is very proud to be photographed with it – and he was really happy that he was doing this course. He felt that it was a wonderful education. It certainly was.
- This is Jubal, a very special place because the community has returned to their land here.

Like most church members, I presume, I was both embarrassed and ashamed of the Australian churches' past treatment of Aborigines and I expected to be constantly reminded of it and made to feel ashamed on our pilgrimage.

But my overwhelming feeling was that the people we met did not want to make us feel guilty – they just wanted to tell their story – to share what they knew and had experienced – the projects they were participating in and how they were restoring their culture. It wasn't so much about forgiveness – it was stronger than that. It was about acknowledging the past, which had been very cruel, but at the same time moving on. They had a determination to restore what they had lost and, in a spirit of generosity, they wanted to share it with everyone.

I would like to tell you about a few projects we saw and organisations we visited:

**Firstly the text book.** *A grammar and dictionary of Gathang: the language of the Birrbay, Guringay and Warrimay* which was published in 2010. This is a collection of all that is known about Gathang languages at this point in time. The research the linguists used for the book includes historical records such as word lists – people, often surveyors, would go out to the land and try to find as many words as possible of the local language so that they could communicate - field notes and audio recordings. The book is very important to the community as speaking their own languages was forbidden for a long time, and if an elder was seen surrounded by young people, the elder could be gaoled in case they were teaching their language.

**Then, Jubal.** The Jubal Aboriginal Corporation regained ownership of the Jubal land in 1999. Jubal means witchetty grubs – because there were a lot of them there. The land is now used as a meeting and gathering space and some community members have built basic accommodation or live in caravans there. The residents estimate that they live on bush tucker 60% of the time and hunting is being taught to the younger generations. The women who live there are largely responsible for the Annual Jubal Country Gathering which is a weeklong celebration for women and children to give thanks for the land. In the background, you can see the dormitory that all the women stay in.

I'll just go back to this earlier slide – this is where they chose this rock and put a plaque to remember the vision that one man had, that eventually their land would be theirs again.

**Ngulingah Local Aboriginal Land Council's project to restore biodiversity and traditional knowledge around the Nimbin Rocks.** This project trains young Indigenous people to be park rangers like the young man I showed you. They learn to compost, analyse soil, weed, propagate seeds such as native ginger and Lilly-pillies, which they use for regenerating the bushland, giving to community groups and schools and selling to the general public. They are receiving a thoroughly useful traditional and modern education.

This slide is the timetable of what they have to do at the moment. Quite a lot! This is where they keep the growing plants and this is part of the traditional education where that man is having a healing/smoking ceremony. That particular ceremony was for us to learn how to do it. He went and took some branches and showed us how to use them.

**The former Kinchela Aboriginal Boys' Training Home** which is now the Benelong Haven Family Rehabilitation Centre was an invitation I dreaded, as I knew that it would be the most confronting. Between June 1924 and May 1970, authorities of the state of New South Wales incarcerated 400 – 600 Aboriginal boys.

Before, we were given a tour of the facilities and told about the services Benelong Haven run, a former boy from Kinchela spoke to us about some of his experiences. I didn't have to actually listen to lots and lots of sad stories because he kept crying when he told just some of them. I could see that the experience had truly broken him - and I was very sorry.

His experiences that he told us about included: being removed from his mother when he was six, having his head shaved when he arrived and having his name taken away from him. The boys were not called by their names; they were called by numbers. However, the boys did get around this by giving each other nicknames. So the man who spoke to us, whose actual name was Ian Lowe, was known as Crow.

Crow talked about having to work hard on the farm, which was part of the home's grounds back then. If the boys did not complete their set work in the morning, they had no breakfast and if they did not complete their work in the evening, no dinner. This is an old picture of the grounds – and you can see that there was a farm once.

He said they were given a packed lunch to take on the bus to school but they always ate it on the way. Most importantly, he spoke of a tree where the boys were chained when they had misbehaved and were whipped. He called this the sacred tree; we were only allowed to look at it from a distance. He told us that there were still blood stains on it. As I said, he only told us a few stories - I've since read some worse ones - but enough for us to see the damage that had been done to these boys and their families.

It was the most important part of the trip, as it showed us a history that we had been responsible for - but now have been given the opportunity to make amends for.

We have been given a second chance by these truly gracious people to help them restore their lives, their language and their culture. A culture and source of knowledge that they truly wish to share with us and future generations.

Let us accept this as graciously it has been given to us.

Amen