

Call to Covenant

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 4 August, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Colin Bradford

Pentecost 8 C

Psalm 107: 1-9, 43; Luke 12: 13-21

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3xogJ2DEbM&t=242s>

Thank you for the invitation to come and speak to Pitt Street Uniting Church about Covenanting.

I met Margaret about a year ago when we were both on a Walking on Country tour. And then there was another one earlier this year which I will talk a little bit about as I reflect on the readings, the reading from Psalm 107.

Psalm 107, for me, carries some insight into what life is like and has been like and continues to be like for the First Peoples of this nation because, as most of you are probably aware, there were hundreds of nations before the invasion by Europeans - and the people of those nations have been scattered. Scattered not just physically but emotionally as well.

What does that mean then, for them? What are the words of hope in this, which I think they're still waiting for, to be brought home from foreign lands?

I've been reading a little bit of Henry Nouwen's writings over the last few months as part of my daily reflection and reading. I just read a few days ago, just a short passage. A short couple of sentences from what he has to say on Christian action that I thought was really relevant to what I want to say to you today, reflecting on these readings and thinking about our relationships with Indigenous Australians.

He writes this: *all Christian action, whether it is visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked or working for a more just and peaceful society is a manifestation of the human solidarity revealed to us in the house of God.*

He goes on to write that: *Christian action is not a nervous effort to bring divided people together, but a celebration of an already established unity.*

It's a vision, I think, of what Covenanting is about. It's entering into that reality which seems to be a hidden promise, that there is in fact an existing unity among all peoples, of all tribes, of all nations, of all cultures, of all languages, of all sexual orientation, of all the things that we tend to allow to separate us.

More formally, Covenanting within the Uniting Church was an agreement initially made at the 1993 Assembly of the Uniting Church, when our then president, Jill Tabart, read out a Covenanting Statement, and that was responded to by the then president of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress' National Committee Pastor Bill Hollingsworth.

My role, over the last 2 years or so - nearly 3 years now I think it is – has been honorary Covenanting Convener for the Synod, and I'm still trying to work out what that means.

The three years has been a frustrating experience for me, to be honest. The frustration is the lack of response that I've received from presbyteries throughout the Synod, with only a few exceptions.

Just to give you an example, I see my role as - well what I thought my role was going to be - was to inform and resource people by getting congregations already in a Covenanting relationship, through their presbytery, to communicate through me to other presbyteries. At the end of last year I was getting nowhere, working through presbyteries. So I decided to send a survey out through the presbyteries to every congregation.

Three presbyteries I got no response from at all! Well they'd said they were sending the survey out to their congregations, but I received no responses. One of them was the Sydney Presbytery. The other one was my presbytery, Sydney Central Coast Presbytery. The other one was the one where I spent most of my time in ministry Canberra Region Presbytery.

I'm naming and shaming now folks. I'm so annoyed, to be honest. So little response.

And then, when I was on the last Walking on Country tour, there were a number of people there from the Queensland Synod. They have two full time - sorry two paid people - serving together in an equivalent full time position - of Covenant Conveners. They've set up a reconciliation action plan and we've done very little in this Synod.

Why is it important?

Well I'll tell you a little bit of what I experienced on the most recent Walking on Country tour. I notice that we've got a least 3 people here: Beth and Katy and Isobel. If there's anyone else who was on that Walking on Country tour so I can remind you of some of the things we experienced.

I invite you to take out your fifty dollar notes if you've got them there, and have a look at it, because you can see in the background of that fifty dollar note. The reason is that David Unaipon is featured on the fifty dollar note. David Unaipon was a great activist and leader of the Aboriginal people and was also an inventor. A very brilliant man. His church still stands there today, in the town of Raukkan, which we visited.

That's a photo that I took of that Uniting / Congress Raukkan Church – Aboriginal Church. That's also on the fifty dollar note. This township is the centre of the Ngarrindjeri Nations. It was set up as a church mission in the 19th century by a pastor who took the trouble to learn their language and encourage cultural practice.

But as happened in a lot of the missions in the 19th Century, the government decided that they would take over. That they would do a better job than the churches and so that's what happened and the people then experienced very harsh treatment, I tell you.

I'm only going to show you three photos. I don't know how clearly you can see it, but look at the expressions on the faces of these residents of Raukkan Mission, taken in 1939. I don't think you can see anyone smiling.

Because that's what life was like for them then. They had to stay there. If they wanted to leave they had to get permission from the Superintendent of the mission – who, of course, was a white man. If they wanted a visitor to come, they had to get permission from the white man. If they want to marry they had to get permission from the white man - and were treated like animals. You can see it in their faces!

It's no wonder that so many Aboriginal people at that time, after 1916, chose to live in makeshift accommodation.

One of my experiences as a very young man – an 18 year old (Bruce, I wasn't going to mention this but I think I will). In 1965, I was on the Freedom Ride led by Charlie Perkins, and one of the strongest memories I still have with me was going into the town of Wellington and then going to where the Aboriginal people were living on the outskirts of the town.

They were not allowed to come into the town, unless they were prepared to live in the mission station at Nanima. So most of them lived out of the town of Wellington. I first understood the reason why they chose not to live on the missions. It hadn't really sunk into me until I saw those pictures and heard the stories of the people of Raukkan.

In that town of Wellington in 1965, we visited where the Aboriginal people were living in this - I guess you'd call it a makeshift camp. The buildings were corrugated iron with sackcloth doors and windows and it was next to a garbage tip.

As an 18 year old, I'd never experienced anything like that in my life - and it shocked me and that shock stays with me.

The township of Raukkan is just so different to that. They obviously have pride in their township. The buildings are good, they've got strong leadership. We met a couple of men in the twenty's or early thirty's who are up and coming leaders of the Ngarrindjeri people and they have hope for the future, not bitterness about the past.

We heard their stories. One person that I met there, a chap called Russell Rigney, he's aged 71. He's not one of the ones on the screen, but his ancestors - his father is not in this particular photo, because there's about 10 photos like that of people, all taken in 1939 of the different families. The Rigneys were there.

He returned only three years ago. He came back after being away for most of his life, because he was part of the stolen generation. So I think Russell could relate a little bit to what it was saying in the Psalm we heard. He was able to give thanks for the steadfast love of God, because he'd come back home - albeit aged 68. But, he'd come back home.

What we heard from the people of Raukkan was their desire to have relationship with us, with the white people.

They also spoke about this idea: Voice, Treaty and Truth.

They confronted us with the idea: *well what does the reality of our lives, as the people who have been oppressed since invasion in 1788, amongst the most impoverished people on earth, who lived a rich life before January 1788 and it's been taken away from us? They have lost their land and they're trying to recover their culture.*

What does it mean when we have our laws imposed on what ownership of land means? One of the men that spoke to us, one of these upcoming leaders, spoke about restitution. It's not a word we hear much, but it gets to the heart of the reality of relationships between the dominant culture and the ones from whom the land was taken.

It gets to the heart of the question about what human solidarity is revealed to us in the house of God and what does it mean for the way we live.

I'll just talk briefly about a couple of other places we went to. We went to Wellington, that same town that I visited 53 years ago, I think it was. 54 years ago!

We met Tom Sloan who is the pastor at the Congress Congregation there. He described what it is for his people there - a small congregation in a building that I think used to be a Methodist church way back.

What he does there mainly, apart from leading worship of a Sunday morning there, and another country town not too far away, most of his work is involved in ministry to men through a Men's Shed, visiting people in hospital, conducting funerals, providing a safe space where men who have been released from prison, who have problems with mental health, problems with addictions - can come and find safety and find hope. And some of them find a way forward in their lives

He gets help from the Condobolin Congregation, who have quite a good music ministry. Fantastic to worship there if you like country and western music. They remind me of *The Sapphires* - if you saw the movie - the way they sing their songs and they come out.

In that Walking on Country tour we went to last, we visited Condobolin church. What I've discovered since about Condobolin Church, through the Regional Committee of Congress here in NSW, is that the building is in danger of falling down. It's become almost dangerous to walk in it because the floorboards are sort of giving way in places. The Regional Committee has some money set aside for the repair of it

This building that they're worshipping in, a few years ago, used to be the Uniting Church there. But the Uniting Church congregation closed through lack of numbers and the Macquarie Darling Presbytery decided to give it to Congress. There'd been an Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship worshipping somewhere there in Condo, and they became part of Congress.

But a question in my mind is, really, we the non-indigenous people worship in buildings like this. Some of them are fortunate to worship in that fantastic building in Raukkan, but most are struggling.

In fact, on this last Walking on Country, when we were in Alice Springs, we met Pastor Julia Lennon who is the pastor of a Congress Faith Community. They're not a congregation yet, but that's the terminology we use. They're a Faith Community at Oodnadatta. She drove two hours on a dirt road from Oodnadatta to Alice Springs, just to come and talk to us.

They worship Sunday mornings in the open. In the middle of winter when it's freezing cold. In the middle of summer when it's burning hot. They haven't got a building to worship in.

The indigenous people want a relationship with us. That's what's Covenant's about. A relationship that, according to what Henry Nouwen wrote, that already exists, but we have to start living with them, as if in the light of the reality that that relationship already exists rather than denying it. This is the truth of what Covenant is about.

Also, I think, restitution is also an important part of this Covenanting process, because we've got it all together folks.

And there are people in our Uniting Church who do not. Not for lack of faith, but because of their circumstances. Circumstances that are imposed by the invaders and we benefit from today.

This is the heart what Covenanting is about.

The Synod of South Australia has set up a special fund to raise money to put up a building at Oodnadatta for the church. And I'm sure the Regional Committee would be very happy to receive donations to help with the repair work necessary at Condobolin.

But there are Aboriginal people living close by here that we could form a relationship with. And that's really the more important thing that I've heard from Aboriginal people. What they really want is genuine relationship.

We will listen to the stories. We acknowledge the truth - and we learn from one another.

We form friendships and learn from one another.

If you haven't picked up what I've been saying on the connection with the Luke reading, think about it. Think about what we have. What we put aside for the future when there are people in desperate need today.

Are we storing up treasures for ourselves? If so for what purpose?

What I've found, meeting with Indigenous people, is that there is great joy in forming those relationships, getting to know one another, hearing one another's stories and learning from each other.

Then human solidarity becomes more real, through the grace of God.