

Fr Kevin's homily for Sunday, Week 14, Year II of Ordinary Time:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday

Readings:

1. Zechariah 9:9-10
2. Romans 8:9,11-13
- G. Matthew 11:25-30

Friends, in today's Gospel, Jesus called us to become like little children. Sometimes, when we're adults, we've become too learned and clever. In other words, we may have become far too skilled in hiding from the truth, in talking the truth away through what we might think are learned arguments. In today's Gospel, Jesus called us to put all these evasions aside, and instead to be open to the truth with the simplicity and the honesty of little children.

That message is particularly apt on this Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday. Are we able to think about what has happened to the First Peoples of this land since European colonisation not dismissing this with learned arguments, but instead approaching this with the simplicity and the honesty of little children?

The theme of this year's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday is 'Walking Together in Christ: Forty Years On'. Forty years on from what? Forty years on from the time when Pope John Paul II on his pilgrimage to Australia in 1986 met with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at Alice Springs. Attached to our bulletin this week is the speech which St John Paul II gave on that day. In this reflection, I'll present to you some of the main points which John Paul made. Even so, I invite you when you go home to read and to reflect on what John Paul said. I ask you especially to read and reflect on this speech not with learned arguments which try to dismiss what St John Paul said, but instead to hear and respond to this message with the simplicity and honesty of little children.

John Paul began by recognising the way of life of our First Peoples before European colonisation. Above all, he recognised their "spiritual closeness to the land". Indeed, he said that the land revealed God to them, "for the land was proof of a power greater than" human beings. He also recognised their systems of law and their processes of initiation which passed their way of life onto the next generations. And St John Paul insisted that their "culture... must not be allowed to disappear." "[Their] songs, [their] stories, [their] paintings, [their] dances, [their] languages must never be lost."

John Paul went on to speak about what happened with European colonisation. He said that the colonisers "brought with them some patterns of behaviour from which the Aboriginal people were unable to protect themselves." Indeed, he added that "the effects of some of these forces are still active among [them] today." But he also noted that the Aboriginal people "have learnt how to survive" and that they have preserved much of their traditional culture. He said that in this, they were like a tree which has survived a bush-fire.

John Paul noted that, during the two hundred years of colonisation, some of the newcomers did stand with the First Peoples. Archbishop Polding, the first bishop of Sydney, "opposed the legal fiction... of *terra nullius*". Catholic missionaries also stood with the First Peoples. John Paul admitted that they did make mistakes. Even so, he said that "their greatest contribution... was to proclaim to [the Aboriginal people] Jesus Christ and to establish his Church in [their] midst."

Native title was recognised by the High Court of Australia in the Mabo decision of 1992. But in his speech six years before this, John Paul prophetically called for native title. He said, "To call for the acknowledgment of the land rights of people who have never surrendered those rights is not discrimination."

John Paul also prophetically called for treaties with our First Peoples. He called them agreements. He said, "The establishment of a new society for Aboriginal people cannot go forward without just and mutually recognised agreements." Across Australia, the first state-wide Treaty with our First Peoples was enacted here in Victoria in December last year. But St John Paul II called for something like this forty years ago in 1986.

John Paul also had a message and a challenge for the Catholic Church in Australia. He said that "the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until [the Aboriginal people] have made [their] contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others." Do we recognise that our Church needs the contribution of our First Peoples? Do we receive their contribution joyfully? These are hard questions for us.

That's a brief summary of John Paul's prophetic speech. Even so, there's more there, which is why I ask you to read and reflect on what St John Paul said.

Now, if we want to be learned and clever, we could of course argue with and reject just about everything which John Paul said. But in today's Gospel, Jesus told us to be open to the truth with the simplicity and the honesty of little children. When you read and reflect on John Paul's speech, please be open to its message as little children would.
