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Statement from (and to) the Heart (Matthew 5.1-12)

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On May 26, 2017, 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegates from around the country came together to deliver the Uluru Statement from the Heart. The Statement was born of extensive consultations conducted by a 16-member Referendum Council which had been appointed by the Australian parliament in 2015. The Council had travelled around the country and met with over 1200 people in the course of its work, and its consultation culminated with a four-day National Constitutional Convention at Uluru.

The Statement itself is a deeply moving and extraordinarily gracious invitation to all the peoples of Australia – an invitation to acknowledge the truth of our nation’s history in service of the healing of the whole; an offering of friendship extended by those who have been and continue to be radically wronged and dispossessed; an invitation to a shared future and freedom. Five months after the Statement was released, on 26 October 2017, the Australian government responded to it by summarily dismissing it – it was not, the Prime Minister said, ‘what was asked for, or expected’.¹ Its central proposal or call was wilfully mischaracterised and trivialised. The current Prime Minister and Cabinet continue to react to it in this vein. Given the graciousness of the Statement itself, the opportunity it offered us all, the gracelessness of the government’s response was genuinely shocking.

In a moment, we will read this Statement in its entirety. Before we do that, I want to touch briefly on the significance of the Statement’s reference to ‘the heart’. At one level, this might seem essentially a geographical reference. ‘Uluru’ is often described as being at the ‘heart’ of Australia. It’s the red centre, the rock in the middle of our land. Since the Statement issues from the gathering at Uluru, it comes

¹ Cited in Celia Kemp (author) and Glenn Loughrey (artist), *A Voice in the Wilderness: Listening to the Statement from the Heart*, November 2018, p.35.

(in this sense) from ‘the heart’. According to indigenous tradition, however, Uluru is not just physically located at the centre of the country; it is also the place where ancient stories converge.

Here is how the story of this convergence is told by Maruku artist and traditional owner of Uluru, Rene Kulitja, and represented in the artwork that accompanied the Statement. ‘A long time ago’, she tells, ‘our grandfathers and grandmothers on their country, they walked from water to water, looking after families, and they told us this story. They have passed away now, and we’re lucky. We have the story. The walking is important to the Story. Uluru-Ku Tjukurrpa – Uluru Story. It is the story for everyone. The Uluru-Ku Tjukurrpa (‘dreaming’) connects everyone, like the Uluru Statement.

‘Tjukurrpa came from north, west, south, east, and teaching all the families so they know. Uluru is that shared place where all of those stories meet. You can see the tracks of ‘Mala’, the Rufous Hare Wallaby people. The track of the rufous hare wallaby shows that the Mala came from the north. From the south-west came the men of the Liru, the poisonous snake people. Kuniya, the carpet snake who was pregnant and about to lay her eggs, she came from the east. The Kuniya and Liru clashed. Kurpanya, the desert dingo dog, came from the west. Together, the Mala and the Kurpanya left Uluru to the south. In the middle ... that’s where Uluru is. The Uluru Statement is where all of our different stories come together’.² A Statement from the heart of culture.

And finally, ‘heart’, it seems to me has one further resonance – one that is key in the Christian tradition too. For ‘the heart’ refers to a particular dimension or capacity of the self. Cynthia Bourgeault says that in ‘the great wisdom traditions of the West (Christian, Jewish, Islamic), the heart is first and foremost *an organ of spiritual perception*’.³ ‘Its primary function is to look beyond the obvious, the

² Rene Kulitja, excerpt from Thomas Mayor, *Finding the Heart of the Nation*, <https://fromtheheart.com.au/explore-the-uluru-statement/>

³ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer: Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice* (Boulder, CO: Shambala Publications, 2016), p.54.

boundaried surface of things, and see into a deeper reality'. The heart, in other words, is connected with wisdom, or what some have called 'total mind'. The intelligence, the knowing, the perception of the heart is more refined and subtle and integrated than our superficial levels of 'thinking' and 'feeling' and 'reacting'. It's beyond the 'limited analytic', strategic, managerial intellect. Indeed, Sufi master, Kabir Helminski, says the heart is 'in spontaneous connection to the cosmic mind'.⁴

Jesus says, the pure in heart 'will see God'. They will see God because in the awakening of this depth dimension of themselves, in the transparency of their knowing to the vision of God, they will see things as they really are – all things interconnected, all suffused with the divine and all people ultimately one. The Statement from the Heart emerges from this kind of knowing, this wisdom. It can only be truly received when those to whom it is addressed make contact with and listen from their own heart. This is its call, the demand it makes of us. No doubt it's why some continue to resist, to refuse its invitation. Today then, let us open our hearts to receive this gift from the heart.

Statement from the Heart

We, gathered at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention, coming from all points of the southern sky, make this statement from the heart:

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from 'time immemorial', and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better,

⁴ Cited in Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer*, p.55.

of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood.

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is the torment of our powerlessness.

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.

Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: the coming together after a struggle. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.

We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history. In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.