

2 July 2022

## On Showing Up (Luke 10. 25-37)

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The first week of July each year in Australia is NAIDOC week – a week to celebrate the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This year’s theme is ‘Get Up! Stand Up! Show Up!’ It’s expressed by the NAIDOC committee with a sense of urgency: ‘Now is our time. We cannot afford to lose momentum for change. We all must continue to Get Up! Stand Up! Show Up! for systemic change and keep rallying around our mob, our Elders, our communities. Whether it’s seeking proper environmental, cultural and heritage protections, Constitutional change, a comprehensive process of truth-telling, working towards treaties, or calling out racism—we must do it together’.<sup>1</sup>

This year, with the election of a new federal government committed to implementing the three key calls in the Statement from the Heart – Voice, Treaty and Truth – it does seem as though we’re on the brink of something new. The possibility and promise of First Nations Australians finally taking their ‘rightful place’ in their own country seems truly alive.<sup>2</sup> But it’s not a done deal. We’re in the midst of a profound shift, yes. **And** most of us have yet to begin to come to grips with how radically the assumptions that underpin almost everything about our way of life – our systems of law, property, finance, government, education, environmental ‘management’ and identity formation – tend to deny or discount indigenous knowledges and disadvantage First Nations peoples. And the church is well and truly part of that.

Historically, Christianity in Australia has been up to its neck in justifying and perpetrating indigenous dispossession. The whole colonial enterprise was founded in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.naidoc.org.au/about/naidoc-week>

<sup>2</sup> ‘We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country’. The Statement from the Heart. <https://fromtheheart.com.au/uluru-statement/the-statement/>

the astoundingly arrogant papal ‘doctrine of discovery’. Developed by the 15<sup>th</sup> century papacy to justify the Spanish conquest of the so-called ‘new world’, this ‘doctrine’ declared that ‘any lands not inhabited by Christians were available to be “discovered”, claimed and the rulership taken over in order that “barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself”’.<sup>3</sup> As Celia Kemp notes in her profound reflections on the Statement from the Heart: ‘The use of the word “discover” makes very clear who our point of reference is. And who it is not. We don’t “discover” our sort of people, usually. We meet them. And we don’t “discover” their homes or properties. We visit them. Because we recognise that another human owns them already’.<sup>4</sup>

In Australia, the doctrine of discovery appeared in the guise of *terra nullius*, which has been called ‘a morphed and more extreme version’ of this fundamentally offensive notion.<sup>5</sup> As Yolgnu elder, Galarrwuy Yunupingu put it, ‘We learned that their law told them a story called terra nullius, which meant that if you go to a land where the people don’t look like you or live like you, you can pretend they don’t exist and take their land’.<sup>6</sup> And the self-justifying link to Christian mission was retained. So, for example, in his diaries of 1860 John McDouall Stuart reported his unilateral declaration of sovereignty over land in central Australia as follows: ‘Built a large cone of stones, in the centre of which I placed a pole with the British flag nailed to it. Near the top of the cone I placed a small bottle, in which there is a slip of paper, with our signatures to it, stating by whom it was raised. We then gave three hearty cheers for the flag, the emblem of civil and religious liberty, and may it be a sign to the natives that the dawn of liberty, civilization and Christianity is about to break upon them’.<sup>7</sup> And lest this seem relatively ancient history, in 2014 a statue of Stuart carrying a rifle was erected in an Alice Springs park where many First Nations people hang out. Its

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.als.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/The\\_Doctrine\\_of\\_Discovery\\_191110.pdf?x68296](https://www.als.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/The_Doctrine_of_Discovery_191110.pdf?x68296)

<sup>4</sup> Celia Kemp and Glenn Loughrey, *A Voice in the Wilderness: Listening to the Statement from the Heart* (Anglican Board of Mission, 2018), p.15.

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.als.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/The\\_Doctrine\\_of\\_Discovery\\_191110.pdf?x68296](https://www.als.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/The_Doctrine_of_Discovery_191110.pdf?x68296)

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Kemp and Loughrey, *A Voice in the Wilderness*, p.15.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Kemp and Loughrey, *A Voice in the Wilderness*, p.14.

inscription stated that he and his companions ‘were the first Europeans to pass through this region, going on to discover the centre of Australia’.<sup>8</sup>

There is a hugely complex and difficult story to be told here ... about Christianity as a tool of colonisation, oppression and cultural destruction even though, in some cases, it subsequently offered resources for resistance and empowerment.<sup>9</sup> We are rightly ashamed of the extent to which our tradition provided ideological justification for evil-doing, and the way institutional churches in every denomination were involved in perpetrating harm against First Nations peoples. As far as I know, no comprehensive process of Makarrata – truth-telling leading to a process of agreement making – has been initiated by the Australian churches as a body, though there have been local and regional initiatives. And I wonder what it might mean for the churches to ‘Get Up! Stand Up! Show Up!’ together and be accountable for this history?

All the same, it’s easy to think that someone, somewhere, institutionally, should be doing something about this. But recently, I’ve been challenged to consider my own unthinking complicity in a system that still fundamentally works for me. I have had the privilege of being involved in an experience called ‘Following Kambri’. Guided by Ngunnawal elders Uncle Wally Bell and Auntie Karen Denny, I have joined a group of teachers, researchers, artists and community development workers walking from the source of Kambri (now known as Sullivan’s Creek) in the hills of Goorooyarroo Nature Reserve just north of here, following the path of the water along the creek as it turns into an urban drain running through the heart of north

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<sup>8</sup> Cited in Kemp and Loughrey, *A Voice in the Wilderness*, p.14.

<sup>9</sup> Australian journalist, Stan Grant, a Wiradjiri and Kamilaroi man, has said of his own experience: ‘Christianity may have been a tool of the oppressor, but that doesn't mean it didn't also become a liberating and empowering idea. I can't imagine the Aboriginal community I grew up in without Christianity. Church was a black church. We sang black hymns. We came together as a black community. It strengthened us, it empowered us, it gave us a moral compass. And it was incredibly important to my own sense of Aboriginal identity’. Benjamin Law, ‘Dicey Topics: Stan Grant talks politics, religion and sex’, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/tv-and-radio/dicey-topics-stan-grant-talks-politics-religion-and-sex-20190415-p51e77.html>, April 20, 2019.

Canberra, to where the creek is now beneath the water, on the northern shore of Lake Burley Griffin. Our group has together sought to become more present to country, to learn something of the significance of this waterway to its traditional custodians, and the richness of its ecology and culture. As part of this process, we've been invited to reflect on our own relationship to systems of privilege and the extent of our commitment to dismantle them.

We were asked to reflect, first of all, on the fact of 'white privilege'. In our society, being white means being born into the racial norm such that you receive benefits, which you barely recognise or acknowledge, from being the dominant ethnicity in society. This privilege involves such things as it never crossing my mind that I could be refused accommodation or service or employment on account of my race; never being subject to racial slurs or racially motivated abuse. It means that if I buy so-called 'flesh' coloured items like band-aids or stockings, they will more or less match my skin tone. I can arrange to be in the company of people of my own race most of the time, and I never have to respond to or work around racial stereotyping. Because I'm middle-class, it means also that I've received a financial leg up from the work of my forebears, since their land and wages were never simply stolen. In short, being born white means I'm born into a system that validates and reaffirms my social belonging; not being born white renders someone systemically vulnerable in a whole different way. Having 'white privilege' does not mean 'I am a racist'; it does mean that I am the beneficiary of invisible systems conferring dominance on my group.<sup>10</sup>

And, once I recognise the extent of this 'privilege', then I start to glimpse the extent to which the system is weighted against meaningful change for indigenous peoples. And this means that if I am really committed to being a 'neighbour' the way the Good Samaritan was a neighbour, enabling to get back on his feet the man who fell among thieves, was beaten and left half dead (which is not a bad description of

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/10-things-you-should-know-about-white-privilege/63cad15c-ff04-4c9f-95b6-597cfd213236>

the colonial enterprise), then I need to get much more serious about my enacted (as distinct from my espoused) commitment to justice.

Yorta Yorta academic, Summer May Findlay, has written that non-indigenous people who express concern for these issues ‘often fall into one of three groups: those who are tokenistic, those who are allies, and those who are accomplices’.<sup>11</sup> ‘Tokenistic’ engagement is superficial – people might say the right words, attend events celebrating indigenous culture or have a piece of indigenous art on their walls – but that’s about it. ‘Allies’, she says, are those who ‘mean well and do the right things most of the time’. They stand against racism, are willing to educate themselves about indigenous issues, and acknowledge First Nations sovereignty and culture. May writes that ‘ally-ship is an excellent first step towards supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’, but while ‘allies get their hands dirty from time to time, they often aren’t ready to stand with us no matter what’. Like the priest and Levite in the story – they still effectively pass by on the other side.

The third step, then, is to become an ‘accomplice’ – and this involves becoming people who ‘stand and act with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’, ‘prepared to allow [them] to define the issue and the required action’. ‘Unlike allies who often step away when things get tough, accomplices stay’. ‘They are 100 per cent committed to addressing inequities’, May says. ‘Accomplices are often the people who you don’t see: they are working behind the scenes to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the spotlight’. She goes on: ‘Accomplices may not always get it right, but they are always ready to listen and learn. We need more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander accomplices. As just three per cent of the Australian population, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need the other 97 per cent of Australians to do the heavy lifting if we are ever to see true reconciliation’.

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Where do you fit? Tokenistic, ally – or accomplice?’, <https://www.croakey.org/where-do-you-fit-tokenistic-ally-or-accomplice/>, May 27, 2020.

Listen again to the call for this NAIDOC week. ‘Now is our time. We cannot afford to lose momentum for change. We all must continue to Get Up! Stand Up! Show Up! for systemic change and keep rallying around our mob, our Elders, our communities. Whether it’s seeking proper environmental, cultural and heritage protections, Constitutional change, a comprehensive process of truth-telling, working towards treaties, or calling out racism—we must do it together’.<sup>12</sup> Some of our Benedictus members and friends are profoundly engaged as ‘accomplices’ in this work. I would characterise my own engagement up till now as being at the level of ‘ally-ship’. The question for me is how I, how more of us, might come closer to our neighbours, might become true accomplices in the pursuit of justice and the work of reconciliation. Perhaps we might ponder this together.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.naidoc.org.au/about/naidoc-week>