

## **Proclamation: Aboriginal Sunday, 21<sup>st</sup> January, 2024**

Rising above the sea for over 300 metres, Wonga, which we now call Arthur's Seat, dominated the southern country of the Boonwurrung tribe on the Mornington Peninsula. Their home and host, Wonga gave them views and a vantage point of the bay they called Nerm with its numerous headlands and sandy bays. Wonga's chasms provided the families with sparkling drinking water from streams and creeks, and the fern gullies held bulbs and roots for food. Many species of birds and animals were part of the Boonwurrung diet; and the trees gave up their bark and timber for housing, hunting implements and weapons – and nearby was stone for tool making.

For tens of thousands of years, this region has been the Boonwurrung people's home and source of life.

As there were approximately 1000 tribes-people, it was necessary for them to move about their extensive country so the food sources could be replenished. Animals and birds had to breed and the seeds of the plants and trees to germinate. The wide rock shelf of Sullivan Bay – at modern-day Sorrento - made gathering shellfish easy. Middens are evidence of their long occupation of this region.

Oblivious of the historical irony and symbolism of his action, HMS Calcutta's Lieutenant Murray - driving of the Union Jack flagstaff through an ancient Boonwurrung campsite's kitchen midden atop Sorrento's Point King in 1802 - set in train a process which led to the destruction of the peninsula's 'old people' and their culture.

As a Boonwurrung Elder said:

“Sometimes I've wondered if the strangers in their sailing ships ever knew who made this land for us. None spoke to our elders to ask who it belonged to, or if they could come here, or if they could stay. Our people always send a messenger ahead to ask permission when we want to visit another tribal country, and we wait for the invitation. The men from the sea did not worry about that sort of thing.”

The first recorded clash in Victoria was close to Point King on 14<sup>th</sup> February, 1802. Sailors fired on and killed Boonwurrung men who tried to resist their landing.

The settlement at Sullivan's Bay was seen as a symbol of the British invasion of Victoria. It is also a symbol of the tragic consequences – population decline, the loss of land and destruction of their ancient heritage, of culture - suffered by the First people in the years that followed.

Yet, they survived. They are a resilient people; also a spiritual people.

Notice some similarities in the Boonwurrung creation story when compared to the Genesis 1 and 2 creation stories:

Bunjil made the earth. With his knife, he cut it in many places to form the rivers, creeks, mountains, valleys and trees. When this was done, he cut bark from a gumtree and placed it on the ground. He dropped a mound of clay on it and he squeezed and rolled it many times until it was soft enough to shape the bodies of two men. He made curly hair for one, and straight for the other, from the fibres of the stringy-bark tree. The Creator knew the men were ready for life and he breathed into their nostrils and their mouths. They took his breath, and they lived.

I recently became aware that in the centre of Sydney – on Gadigal land - there is a monument recalling the first Christian service of worship held in Australia. It was celebrated on 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 1788 by Rev Richard Johnson, chaplain to the First Fleet and to the Settlement of New South Wales. The biblical text he chose -

from verse 12 of today's psalm 116 - grasped my attention: "What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits to me?"

On Aboriginal Sunday, the Sunday before Australia Day, as we reflect on its two calls: to mourn the mistreatment of First Nations people and to celebrate their resilience and survival, this text from the very first sermon ever given on this land has a word for us.

What nation around the world has got a monument to a biblical passage that asks this incredible question? "What shall I render unto the Lord for all of his benefits towards me?" Originally directed at convicts, their captors and a few early citizens, today it is directed to the people of Australia, to us. It's about the challenges our country faces with Australia's First Peoples. What shall we render unto the Lord, for all of his benefits toward us? We are the beneficiaries of Aboriginal dispossession of land, language and culture: often marked, as indicated by the confession we made earlier, by apathy, silence and lack of compassion.

The confession continued:

Hear Lord, our deep 'sorry', our pain,  
Dishonouring first peoples for our sinful gain  
We pray restoration, forgiveness, renewal  
That we'll walk together as one, born in you.

Maybe the 'Uluru Statement from the Heart' with its generous invitation for Voice, Treaty and Truth opens the door to address the question: "What shall we render unto the Lord for all his benefits to us?" The sadness many First Nations people felt when the Voice referendum did not get up was a blow; but, already, their resilience is rising again. They are still holding to the dream of Voice, Treaty and Truth from the 'Statement From the Heart'. I've seen it in the local Nairn Marr Djambana community. I invited them to be with us today; but I think they needed more lead time than I was able to give them.

Our second reading, from the prophet Micah, has the people of Israel asking a similar question. What does the Lord require of me? The response: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God. It's about what we do. It's about pursuing justice and kindness; and, we discover how to do this as we walk humbly with our God. It's about the journey with God and recognising this will shape our journey with our neighbours. It's about learning how to do it as we go; and it will include learning how to love our neighbour as we love ourselves.

So, we are not given an answer. We are given an invitation, a call, to travel a pathway. For me, it will include continuing to grow a relationship with our local Indigenous neighbours at 'Nairn Marr Djambana'. I recognise it is going to take a long time to give birth to justice and kindness – to live into action what I will render unto the Lord for all of his benefits towards me. It will include speaking truth. It will include listening deeply to their voices. It will include pursuing processes of reconciliation as I continue to walk humbly with our God.

What will it mean for you?

That first sermon with its question, 'What shall I render unto the Lord?' is about our response to God who has given so much to us. What will you give, what will you do in return?

As you ponder that question, know that God is still here – with you - that God is giving you opportunities to do justice and love mercy and kindness; and that as you travel with God, you discover how to do it. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Alan Mathews: 19<sup>th</sup> January, 2024