

## Gippsland Anglicans

*Committed in Christ: Connecting in Service: Creative in Spirit*

*We acknowledge the First Nations people of this region as the traditional custodians of the land on which the Diocese of Gippsland serves, and pay our respects to past, present, and emerging Elders of the GunaiKurnai, Boonwurrung, Bidawal and Ngarigo/Monero peoples.*

---

NAIDOC Week 2021 begins on Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> July and continues for the next week! During this week celebrations across Australia mark the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

Each year has its own theme. Heal Country! the theme chosen for NAIDOC week this year seems, to my ears, to ring with strident urgency. In previous years I, with other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, have been privileged to celebrate Aboriginal culture in a gentle, relaxed way, in line with the theme chosen for that year. But this year I feel the story has changed.

There seems to me to be a new intentionality, a call from Aboriginal Elders to all - Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to work together to 'Heal Country, heal our nation. 'To recognise, protect, and maintain all aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage.' Is Country at risk of fracture? and are the cracks no longer able to be papered over, ignored, suffered?

Healing is needed – and that has implications for all who live and work on Australian soil.

We do well to consider this NAIDOC week theme in the light of the reading for Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> July 2021. In the early chapters of St Mark's Gospel Jesus had been out and about, criss-crossing over the nearby Sea of Galilee, stilling the storm, healing people, and raising from death to life Jairus, the daughter of a synagogue leader.

Then, in Chapter 6 of Mark's Gospel, we read of Jesus coming back to Nazareth, to his home town/his native place. For the first time in the Markan account Jesus entered the synagogue, on the Sabbath, and began to teach - and those who heard him were astounded.

It's hard to know what really happened - but from Mark's account it seems that the local people were both overwhelmed and threatened. 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! And then their retort.....He's just the fatherless Carpenter - Mary's Son! With all that that implied!

Jesus was rejected - rendered powerless and voiceless in his own town, by his clan and among his own household. And Jesus declared himself to be a prophet without honour - in his own hometown. And he moved on...

In Australia, our own First Nations people - Aboriginal Australians - have suffered a similar silencing and marginalization – and all who have migrated here from other lands and made their home on these shores - are the poorer. Even the very land itself is now crying out - through flood and fire, over clearing, over mining, over burning - we see the changing patterns of climate and the struggling health of the earth as we know it.

This year's NAIDOC Theme – Heal Country! is a wakeup call – an invitation to us all...

***Let us listen to the call of the Aboriginal Elders this NAIDOC week – 'Heal Country, heal our nation'.***

*They write,:*

'Country is inherent to our identity. It sustains our lives in every aspect - spiritually, physically, emotionally, socially, and culturally. It is more than a place.

When we talk about Country it is spoken of like a person. Country is family, kin, law, lore, ceremony, traditions, and language. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples it has been this way since the dawn of time. Through our languages and songs, we speak to Country; through our ceremonies and traditions we sing to - and celebrate Country – and Country speak to us.

Increasingly, we worry about Country. For generations Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been calling for stronger measures to recognise, protect, and maintain all aspects of our culture and heritage - for all Australians. We have continued to seek greater protections for our lands, our waters, our sacred sites and our cultural heritage from exploitation, desecration, and destruction. We are still waiting for those robust protections.

Healing Country means hearing those pleas to provide greater management, involvement, and empowerment by Indigenous peoples over country. Healing Country means embracing First Nation's cultural knowledge and understanding of Country as part of Australia's national heritage. That the culture and values of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders are respected equally to the cultures and values of all Australians.

The right to protect Country and culture is fundamental. Destruction and desecration of our sacred lands or ancient sites - some of the oldest human occupation sites on the planet – is an enormous loss for both our nation and the world.

But to truly heal Country we have more to do. Our lands will continue to burn from bushfires, droughts will continue to destroy our livelihoods, without using traditional practices that have protected this country for centuries.

For generations, our Elders and communities have advocated, marched and fought for substantive institutional, structural and collaborative reform. The aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the culmination of generations of consultation and discussions among our nations on a range of issues and grievances.

Healing Country means finally resolving many of the outstanding injustices which impact on the lives of our people. It must be a fair and equitable resolution.

Fundamental grievances will not vanish. In the European settlement of Australia, there were no treaties, no formal settlements, no compacts. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people therefore did not cede sovereignty to our land. It was taken from us. That will remain a continuing source of dispute.

To Heal Country, we must properly work towards redressing historical injustice. While we can't change history, through telling the truth about our nation's past we certainly can change the way history is viewed.

After 250 years, our children and our future generations deserve better. For generations we have repeatedly called for just recognition of our right to participate on an equal basis in economic and social terms. Yet such participation cannot be successful unless, first, there is formal recognition that Indigenous people have been dispossessed and, second, definite, specific steps are taken to redress the grave social and economic disadvantage that followed that dispossession.

Healing Country is more than changing a word in our national anthem – it is about the historical, political, and administrative landscapes adapting to successfully empower and celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, nations, and heritage. We are all looking for significant and lasting change.'

And the Elders conclude:

'We cannot afford to let pass the very real opportunity that now presents itself for reform based on a fundamental change in the relationship Australia has with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.'

In the light of the Call of the Aboriginal Elders to **Heal Country**, let us pause and reflect:

We – you and I, are people of Christian Faith... Gippsland Anglicans - Committed in Christ: Connecting in Service: Creative in Spirit – who together as a Diocese acknowledge the First Nations People of this region as the traditional custodians of the land on which the Anglican Diocese of Gippsland serves.

In this year, when the Aboriginal elders have issued the call to Heal Country!

- How do we hear this call, this theme, this NAIDOC week offering? ... a cry of pain? - a longing for life? .... a deep, unrelenting, lifegiving commitment carried within the Aboriginal Community..... for all Australia?
- How do we respond? might we non-Aboriginal people hear and receive this call and all that it holds - as gift – for you and for me, and for the Diocese of Gippsland and the Church of God.

And in faith and prayer

Let us together give thanks to God,

Creator, Redeemer, and Life- Giving Spirit

**Amen**