

Reflection – 22 May 2022 Pastor Seng Eng Low @ Lindfield UC

In the history of Australia, the relationship between the Aboriginal and Torres Straits peoples and those who came to settle in this land has been fraught with conflict. When we talk about 'reconciliation' with the first peoples, it is about healing that conflict and the division that has been created. Reconciliation, at its heart, is about strengthening relationships between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous peoples, for the benefit of all Australians.

National Reconciliation Week is the same week each year and runs from 27th May to 3rd June. It is a good time for us to remember the past, to reflect on our journey towards reconciliation and to renew our commitment to that on-going journey. *Remembering* is an important part of that process. Remembering and acknowledging our history is often difficult and painful, when we think of the hurt and loss that have been suffered by our Indigenous brothers and sisters. I am sure that none of us here would want to minimize or brush aside the injustices that they have suffered in the past, and continue to suffer today.

But today, I would like to focus on another kind of remembering, remembering and acknowledging the positive steps that we as a nation have made towards reconciliation. Why is this important? If we only remember and dwell on the mistakes of the past, the wrongs done, then is only one side of the truth. We also need to recall and celebrate where individuals or communities have made amends or worked to change things for the better. We need to remember and celebrate the good they have done because these show that although reconciliation is a difficult and costly process, significant steps *have* been made. This in turn gives us hope that even greater change can indeed be achieved.

So as we approach Reconciliation Week, let us remember some of the significant steps we have made on the journey of reconciliation:

As I mentioned at the start of the service, in 1967, on 27th May, a referendum was held in which Australians voted that all Aboriginals and Torres Straits Islanders should be recognized as part of the Australian population. Now before this, the Constitution of Australia did not recognize them, and a referendum was the only way that the Constitution could be changed to include Indigenous people and open the way for them to the rights of full citizenship.

Now let me tell you a little about the history of referendums. Since Federation, there have been 44 proposed changes to the Constitution, each one being put forward to the people of Australia in a referendum. Out of these 44 proposals, only 8 were ever successful. Most referendums resulted in defeat, for example, in 1999, the referendum to make Australia a republic was defeated.

The 1967 referendum to recognize Indigenous people in the Constitution was one of a handful of successful referendums, and indeed it is the most

successful referendum in Australia's history. The vote was 90.77% in favour of change. What this shows is that the vast majority of ordinary Australians voted in support of the change. A vast majority of Australians had their hearts in the right place. This was a significant moment in our history, and worth remembering.

But before the 1967 referendum, there had already been a growing groundswell of support for change. The Australian public didn't just wake up one day and say, 'Hey, let's change the Constitution to recognize Indigenous peoples!' From the 1950s on, there were a range of actions by different people and organizations, protests that raised public awareness of the issue and even drove it into the international spotlight. Among them were the Yirrkala Bark Petitions, the Wave Hill Walk-off and the 1965 Freedom Ride. These actions all laid the groundwork and contributed to the success of the 1967 referendum. They show that there have been individuals and groups willing to stand up for change and make a difference. They are worth remembering.

3rd June is the last day of Reconciliation Week, and marks the anniversary of another significant date in our journey of reconciliation. When the first fleet came to Australia, the land was declared terra nullius, meaning empty land or land belonging to no one. But on June 3rd 1992, the High Court of Australia, ruled that the term 'terra nullius' should never have been applied to Australia. This decision – known as the Mabo Decision – recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were already living on the land and had rights to the land – rights that existed before the British arrived and still exist today.

The Mabo decision was named after Torres Strait Islander Eddie Mabo who led the fight to change land laws to recognise Indigenous connection and traditional ownership of land in Australia. Eddie Mabo was born on the tiny island of Mer, in the Torres Straits. His mother died soon after he was born and he was adopted into his uncle's family. In his life, Eddie worked on pearling boats, as a cane cutter, and as a railway fitter, and a gardener, before in 1982, he began his court case against the State of Queensland. He and sympathetic lawyers worked on his case for 10 years, but unfortunately, he passed away just months before he could learn he had won his legal battle.

The 1992 Mabo decision led to the Native Title Act (1993) which created a framework that recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have rights to, and interests in, certain land because of their traditional laws and customs. Eddie Mabo was posthumously awarded the Australian Human Rights Medal. Eddie Mabo is worth remembering.

Do any of you remember the Walk for Reconciliation across the Sydney Harbour Bridge, on May 28th 2000? The original plan was to have Indigenous people gather at one end of the bridge and non-Indigenous at the other and they would walk toward each other and meet in the middle. But not everyone was comfortable with the idea, so it was decided that everyone would walk together

from the north end of the bridge to the south end. Walking together for reconciliation. The organizing committee for the march was not confident of public support and were hoping that at least a few hundred people would show up. In fact, about 250,000 people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, made their way across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in a continuous stream that lasted nearly six hours. It was the largest political demonstration ever held in Australia. Again, this shows that many ordinary Australians support reconciliation and were willing to make the effort to show that they cared. The numbers astonished the organizers, and Evelyn Scott, the chair of the committee said, 'I'll die happy tomorrow!' That day is worth remembering.

Another significant event in the history of reconciliation was National Apology. On 13 February 2008, after winning election, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd moved a motion in parliament of Apology to the Indigenous Australian "Stolen Generations". The apology was the new parliament's first order of business; Rudd became the first Australian Prime Minister to publicly apologize to the Stolen Generations on behalf of the Australian federal government. Kevin Rudd as the elected leader of the Australian people, spoke on our behalf in offering a heartfelt apology. He said: 'We, the Parliament of Australia, request that this apology, be received in the spirit in which it is offered, as part of the healing of the nation...' This was a powerful emotional event for many Indigenous people and many of them have said that it provided some healing. This apology was momentous and is worth remembering.

And now that the elections are over, we will see if this new Parliament will have the courage to do something equally momentous for Reconciliation. We will see if they will respond to the invitation of Indigenous Australia, expressed in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which asks for the establishment of an Indigenous Voice to Parliament, a truth-telling commission and a Treaty. We will see whether this parliament will be courageous enough to take up this invitation and begin the process.

I take heart from the opening words of Anthony Albanese's speech last night, in which he accepted victory in the 2022 election. This is what he said: "I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet. I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. And on behalf of the Australian Labor Party, I commit to the Uluru Statement from the heart in full." These were his very first words as Prime Minister-elect.

Of course, this is only a statement of intention. For the Uluru Statement to be accepted will require another referendum to again change the Constitution of Australia. It is my hope that the people of Australia will again rise to the occasion and show that the vast majority of us have our hearts in the right place, that the vast majority of us want justice for our Indigenous brothers and sisters. In remembering the past, when Australians did the right thing, I have hope for the future.

In our gospel reading for today, Jesus said: 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with them...I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you.' As Jesus prepares to go to the cross, he tells the disciples that he will send the Holy Spirit to remind them of what he has taught them.

It has been said that the central activity of Christianity is remembering. When we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion, we are remembering. In the words of the liturgy, Jesus tells us: 'Do this in remembrance of me.' We remember, that Christ has dwelt among us, that he laid down his life for us and that he conquered death for us in the Resurrection. We can remember all this and have peace, peace not as the world gives, but a peace beyond understanding. And because we remember and have this peace, we can afford to be brave and make change. As Jesus says: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.'

When the Uniting Church was formed, the Basis of Union which was its foundation document quoted 2 Corinthians: 'In Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself.' Through Jesus, God is seeking to heal our broken relationships with him and with each other. So reconciliation, including reconciliation with our Indigenous brothers and sisters is in the very bones of the Uniting Church. When we work for reconciliation, we participate in God's mission to reconcile the world to himself. There can be no higher purpose. There can be no higher calling.

The journey of Reconciliation with Indigenous Australia is far from over, but generations of Australians have fought hard for meaningful change. We remember and honour what they have done. They show us what can be done when we are determined.

In our reading for today, Jesus says that 'those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.' Jesus and the Father will come and make their home in our hearts. When we open our hearts to God, he has promised to come and make a home in our hearts. Today, let us commit ourselves to living with God in our hearts, and being part of his mission of reconciling the world to himself. Amen