

# Australians all let us rejoice?

## *Australia Day Talk – St Vincent De Paul*

**Graeme Mundine  
Executive Officer  
Aboriginal Catholic Ministry  
Sydney Archdiocese**

---

### **Acknowledgement of Country**

#### **Opening Prayer**

**O God, Powerful and gentle,  
You love this southern land  
And all its peoples, old and new,  
As the Cross shines in our heavens  
So may Christ bring light to our nation.  
As the waves encircle our shores  
So may your mercy enfold us all.  
We ask this  
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your son,  
Who lives and reigns with you  
In the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
God for ever and ever.  
Amen<sup>1</sup>.**

Thank you for inviting me here to speak today on the eve of our national celebration of all that is great about Australia. Of course, for me as an Aboriginal person it is a day that also commemorates what I have often called the original sin of Australia. On this day 225 years ago the invasion of this country caused a fracture so deep in the lives of Aboriginal people that it has yet to be healed. How this affected Aboriginal peoples has certainly yet to be fully understood and comprehended by the majority of non-Indigenous Australians. Also, yet to be recognized and fully understood is the effect on non-Indigenous Australians. That is why I called my talk today “Australians all let us rejoice?” I have no doubt that over the next day or two our national anthem will be sung often. But I wonder how much we really take note of the words. Because when we sing “Australians all let us rejoice” I don’t feel that means me. For some of us, Australia Day is a day to mourn what we have lost and a day to celebrate that we have survived.

Not everyone wants to hear that. They say we are causing division or diminishing the achievements of this country and focusing on too much old history. Some would even say we should get over it; that we can’t go back and in any case we are better off now than we were before. But it’s important that we recognize that implicit in our celebrations of our nation we are also celebrating the fact that

---

<sup>1</sup> Liturgy News December 2001

this land was taken from Aboriginal peoples, without their consent and without due process under the law - even of that time. It was not a peaceful coming together of two groups of people. This land was taken by force and we suffered for it and we still suffer.

Last week I had the opportunity to go and see the Sydney Theatre Company's excellent production of Kate Grenville's *Secret River*. I am sure some of you have read the book. It tells the story of the first interactions of settlers and Aboriginal people, not too far from here on the Hawkesbury River. The play was based on a novel which I believe is based on the author's family history. But it's a story we all know well from our own families. I think one of the themes portrayed particularly strongly was that this man, William Thornhill, came from a society where he was the bottom of the heap. He was poor and unable to make it in London. He was driven by poverty to steal and ended up being sent to Sydney where he eventually became a free man. Here he could achieve something that he could never even dream of in his own country. It seemed so easy for him to claim what he saw as empty land. He had a dream for his family. He moved from being rejected and excluded to being a land owner. He became someone that owned something and could provide for his family. Suddenly his future looked very different. He developed a connection to the land and all that it could provide for him.

But of course it wasn't empty land, there were people living there before him. There were people who still lived there. There were people who loved that land, who were custodians and had responsibility to that land and there were people who were completely reliant on that land for their sustenance. But as he desperately tried to make something of his life he soon trampled on those who he now saw as his inferiors. Those who were dispossessed took on the behaviour of the House Masters – the oppressed became the oppressors.

As I am sure you know the story ended in horror and brutality. The Aboriginal people were massacred by the White settlers along the river, as they were all around the country. William Thornhill and others like him were unable to see the humanity of the Aboriginal people and he lost sight of his own. He was unable or unwilling to recognize that if he could love the land, even as a newcomer, and see his future in this place why would it be any different for Aboriginal people who had been there for so many thousands of years? He failed to empathize or put himself in their position that as he had lost everything in his home country he was now inflicting the same fate on those who stood in his way. He was driven by fear about what he thought Aboriginal people were like and what he imagined they may do to him. He was also driven by fear about what he stood to lose. He could not go back so he had to plough ahead, no matter what the cost.

Of course for every William Thornhill there were those who could empathise, who didn't harbour murderous intent in their hearts. But the die was cast, Australia was now British and at no point, really until the 1990s, did anyone take seriously the idea that Aboriginal peoples were sovereign peoples who had their rights and laws trampled on and who were colonized against their will.

It wasn't until the Mabo case was successful and the idea of *Terra Nullius*, or empty land, was overturned that Australia really began to address the idea that this land had been taken. We still have some way to go on that.

Of course the Catholic Church was very much involved in the taking of lands from Indigenous peoples. It was the Pope after all that in the fifteenth century gave Europeans the justification to go

forth and convert the non-Christian people of Africa, Asia, North and South America. Through a series of Papal Bulls and letters the Pope justified the colonizing of lands and peoples under the guise of saving them from their heathen ways.

For example, the Papal Bull *Romanus pontifex*, issued in 1455 said

*if we bestow suitable favors and special graces on those Catholic kings and princes, who...restrain the excesses of the Saracens and of other infidel enemies of the Christian name [and] ...vanquish...their kingdoms and habitations, though situated in the remotest parts unknown to us.*<sup>2</sup>

The Holy See encouraged and anointed European Kings to “grant,” “discover,” “subdue,” “acquire” and “possess,” and permanently control non-Christian indigenous peoples, along with their lands, territories, and resources<sup>3</sup>.

Unlike in other places such as the USA there is no direct relationship between the laws of our land and the Papal Bulls. But there is a clear line of connection when you consider the attitudes that those first White settlers came with. In 1788, they came with attitudes already formed towards Black people, with attitudes towards what they saw as heathens and with attitudes towards what they saw as legal ownership of land. These attitudes had been formed over Centuries and were certainly informed by the colonizing of the Americas and Africa. Of course Britain was also intimately involved in the Slave trade, which had not yet been abolished by the British parliament.

And so these were the circumstances under which Australia was discovered. Is it all in the past? Well the past has been well documented, but I just want to dwell on the present for now. In fact when I think of the next line of our national anthem “for we are young and free” I have to question that as well as my mind immediately goes to the high rate of incarceration of Aboriginal people, particularly our youth.

Aboriginal young people are 31 times more likely to be imprisoned than other people and this is rapidly increasing. Another statistic that I think tells us a lot about our system is that only 32 % of Aboriginal youth are put into diversionary programs compared to 63% of non-Indigenous youth. In NSW, Aboriginal people are 13 times more likely to be jailed than non-Indigenous people. Overall 54% of juveniles jailed are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Considering we make up only 2.5 % of the population that is an outrageous statistic.

But I am often told that if people have done a crime they should be punished for it. Sure, but is it that simple? Can we honestly say that there are no systemic issues of racism in our police force and judiciary that does not ensure that if you are a young black man you are more likely to be picked up, charged and jailed than a young white man committing the same crime? Are we saying that Aboriginal people are inherently more criminal in their behavior than white fellas? Do we ignore the exclusion and discrimination that so many of our young people face? Or even the poverty and lack of education that many of them experience. Is it easier for us to presume that Aboriginal people are somehow genetically predisposed to alcoholism or drug addiction rather than look at what leads

---

<sup>2</sup> Tonya Gonnella Frichner, Special Rapporteur, Impact on Indigenous Peoples of the International Legal construct known as the Doctrine of Discovery, which has served as the Foundation of the Violation of their Human Rights, 2010, United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, [www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/.../E%20C.19%202010%2013.DOC](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/.../E%20C.19%202010%2013.DOC)

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

people down that path? It's the factors that cause these things that need to be addressed, not putting all our resources into the punishment at the end of the line.

And so it's not all in the past. The means and the policies might have different names but so much of what Aboriginal people encounter now is driven by the same kind of thinking that drove the likes of William Thornhill in the early days of colonization. Many people still think that we need to be civilized, or made more like other Australians. The predominant thinking in the Australian psyche is still that Aboriginal people are inferior and that if we just got off our backsides and worked "like us" it would all be fixed. How often do you hear "we just need to get them jobs, we need to bring them into the modern economy; we need to do this and we need to do that". There are also Aboriginal people who say those of us who go on about rights and culture are trying to keep us all as museum pieces.

I don't think that's a valid criticism, or even a valid understanding of what many Aboriginal people do want. In reminding people about rights and the importance of retaining culture I am not saying let's not develop. I am not saying let's don lap laps and spend our days hunting – although I have to say after some of the days I have at work it's quite an attractive idea. What I am saying is that we have the right to choose what aspects of our culture we wish to retain and what we are willing to trade to participate in the modern economy. We have the right to say your Western White culture is not the standard to which we all aspire. I want to work and participate in the modern economy, but I would also like to speak my own language, to live in my own Country, to own my own land. In most cases Aboriginal people never had the choice about what was taken away from them. We have the right to make decisions about our own lives.

I think it is important that we remember and commemorate all that has happened to us. The displacement from our lands, the massacres, the rapes, the poverty, the sheer humiliation that so many of our parents and grandparents experienced, and the ongoing issues that still plague so many today.

It is also important that you remember. This isn't Aboriginal history – this is Australian history. You too should acknowledge the painful past that we share.

On Australia day all Australians should pause and remember as they wave the flag and crack a tinny that every single thing that Australia has achieved is on the back of Aboriginal dispossession. Every privilege enjoyed by those who so proudly claim their roots back to the first fleet and those who came after was gained by trampling over Aboriginal people. From taking our land to taking our children and putting them to work as cheap labour for white fellas this country has been built on the back of Aboriginal people whether they were willing or not. And believe me, as much as we might have our success stories. As much as there are those of us who succeed in the White world the cost has been very very high. This is Australia's original sin and as a country we have never truly sought penance with open hearts. Until we do so we can never really heal and reconcile.

Tomorrow, I will be at the Yabun concert at Victoria Park celebrating Survival Day. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from all over Sydney and beyond will gather there, catch up with family, enjoy a concert by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, and listen to some interesting discussions about issues that are important to us. It's been a tough 200 years or so, but we

celebrate who we are as Aboriginal people and that we are still here and still strong. We invite you to recognize and celebrate our survival and make that part of **your** day of celebration.

So in conclusion, as the Nation celebrates tomorrow, whether you come along to Yabun, or have a BBQ in your backyard, I would ask you to pause, reflect and perhaps say a prayer for all that has been lost and all those who have suffered. But also celebrate and give thanks for all that has survived and for the Aboriginal cultures and peoples that enrich this great place Australia.

Thank you!