

NAIDOC Week

Sermon for the Parish of South Darebin

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost, 14 July 2024

2 Samuel 6: 1–5, 12b–19; Psalm 24; Ephesians 1: 1–14; Mark 6: 14–29

The Reverend Canon Christopher Carolane

Today is the final day of NAIDOC week. NAIDOC stands for National Aborigines and Islanders day Observance Committee, which was the name of the committee that was originally responsible for organising the national NAIDOC Week activities. Over time the acronym has become the name for the entire festival, which calls all Australians to celebrate the history, culture, and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is also an opportunity for non-Indigenous Australians, to engage in a journey of truth telling, reconciliation, understanding, and unity.

Just as my mother used to say on Mother's Day, "every day should be Mother's Day", so every day should be a day for focusing on the themes and callings of NAIDOC Week. Thus, although today is the last day of NAIDOC week this year, it is not a reason for not considering its importance for us.

The theme for NAIDOC Week this year is *Keep the Fire Burning! Blak, Loud & Proud.*

The theme honours the enduring strength and vitality of First Nations culture – with fire a symbol of connection to Country, to each other, and to the rich tapestry of traditions that define Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

As Christians, we are called to love our neighbours as ourselves (Mark 12: 31). We must look beyond our differences, seeking understanding, respect, and love for all of God's children. NAIDOC Week provides us with a unique opportunity to embody this commandment by actively listening to and learning from the stories and experiences of First Nations people. Sadly, many of the stories and experiences that have happened after colonisation are stories of horror for Indigenous Australians and stories of shame for many non-Indigenous Australians.

Often, I hear people say, "Why should I feel shame? I didn't do those terrible things, and I have no control over what was done in the past". In one sense this is true, but the question of whether non-Indigenous Australians should feel shame for the historical and ongoing injustices faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is a complex and deeply personal one.

Let me suggest several reasons why non-Indigenous Australians may feel a sense of shame, and why this emotion can play a role in the journey toward reconciliation and justice:

The first is acknowledgment of historical injustices.

The colonisation of Australia involved acts of violence, dispossession, and oppression against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These acts included massacres, forced removals from land, and policies that aimed to assimilate and erase Indigenous cultures. Recognising these historical truths and the suffering inflicted upon Indigenous communities can evoke feelings of shame in those who are descendants of colonisers or who benefit from the structures established by colonisation.

The second is to recognise intergenerational trauma and ongoing disparity.

The effects of colonisation are not just historical; they are ongoing. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to experience disparities in health, education, employment, and justice. The legacy of policies that resulted in the stolen generations, where Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families, is lasting trauma. Non-Indigenous Australians may feel shame knowing that these policies were implemented by previous generations of their own society.

The third is to accept collective responsibility.

While individuals today may not have directly participated in past injustices, there is a collective responsibility to address and rectify the consequences of those actions. Feeling shame can be a part of acknowledging this collective responsibility and the privilege that has resulted from the marginalisation of Indigenous peoples.

The fourth is the need to empathise.

Feeling shame can arise from a deep sense of empathy and moral conscience. It reflects an awareness of the pain and suffering of others and a recognition that one's own community or nation played a role in causing that suffering. This emotion can motivate individuals to advocate for justice, support reparative actions, and engage in meaningful reconciliation efforts.

Finally, we need to develop a commitment to reconciliation.

Shame can be a catalyst for change. By confronting uncomfortable truths and experiencing feelings of shame, non-Indigenous Australians can be moved to learn more about Indigenous cultures, histories, and perspectives. This emotional response can lead to a commitment to building a more inclusive and equitable society, where the rights and dignity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are upheld.

However, it is also important to note that while shame can be a starting point for awareness and action, it should not lead to paralysing guilt or defensiveness. The

goal is to channel these feelings into positive actions that contribute to healing and reconciliation. As Christians, we can draw on our faith to seek forgiveness, strive for justice, and work towards the restoration of right relationships.

In the words of the prophet Micah, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6: 8). I would argue that to walk humbly with our God we must acknowledge past wrongs and commit ourselves to justice and reconciliation for all people.

The prophet Isaiah wrote concerning reconciliation and restoration: “They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations” (Isaiah 61: 4). Healing the wounds of the past and building a future based on justice, equality, and mutual respect lead to reconciliation and restoration.

For too long, the history and contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been overlooked or marginalised. As non-Indigenous Australians, as relative newcomers to this land, it is our responsibility to acknowledge and tell the truth of our shared history, including the horror, pain and suffering caused by colonisation and dispossession. This acknowledgment is a crucial step towards healing and reconciliation.

We must take the time to educate ourselves about the rich cultural heritage of First Nations peoples. Where possible, we should attend local events, participate in discussions, and immerse ourselves in their stories and traditions. By doing so, we not only honour their legacy but also foster a deeper sense of connection and understanding within our community.

In his letter to the Romans, St Paul wrote “For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12: 4–5). We are all part of the body of Christ, and it is through our unity and collective efforts that we can bring about positive change.

As we consider the messages of NAIDOC Week, let us commit ourselves to being agents of reconciliation and advocates for justice. Let us reach out to our First Nations neighbours with open hearts and minds, seeking to understand their perspectives and experiences. Let us stand together, united in our shared humanity and in our love for God and one another.

I encourage each of us to pray for healing and reconciliation in our nation. May we be guided by the Holy Spirit to act with compassion, humility, and courage. May we work together to build a future where the dignity and worth of every person are recognised and respected.

Let us go forth with a renewed commitment to love, justice, and reconciliation, inspired by the words of our Lord Jesus Christ: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5: 9).

Amen