

As we all know, today is Australia Day. It should be an occasion for national celebration. But it is clear that at the moment, Australia Day is not without its divisions and differences. An inescapable part of Australia Day, of course, is that it commemorates the arrival of the first European settlers in Australia. Many aboriginal people prefer to call it “Invasion Day.” And that is something they wish to remember and mourn, but not celebrate.

In this regard, I’d like to share a little story with you from my family.

A few years ago, after the death of one of my aunts, I met up with a cousin who told me that he had inherited a scrap book which had belonged to my great grandfather. He was planning to donate it to the Australian National Library, where it now rests – and he thought I might like to have a look at it first.

I knew just a little about my great grandfather. He was Australian-born – in Shoalhaven, N.S.W. in 1839, actually – and I knew he had been a journalist and a small newspaper owner. And he died in 1929, at the age of 90: there’s a lot of longevity in my family, I’m happy to say! I knew he had founded a number of regional newspapers – he sold his first at a good profit to the Fairfax family after just six months – and my father said that he knew seven languages. He was a poet and a musician, even a composer of popular songs.

A lot of the scrapbook delighted me, but was what I expected. His songs, his poems, articles in Spanish for a newspaper in Chile, and especially some of his articles in *The Bulletin*. My great-grandfather was a staunch Australian. Not anti-British, but convinced that we had to stand on our own feet as a united country. He was a strong supporter of federation, therefore.

What I had not expected, however, was his outspoken defence of aboriginal people. From the scrapbook I discovered that along with Spanish and German he learned at least two aboriginal languages. When one of the leaders of the aboriginal people around Wollongong, a certain “King Mickey” Johnson, died,

he wrote a touching obituary in the form of a poem . Written beneath a black-and-white photograph of a man with proud and noble bearing, it began , “Old chieftain of an ill-used race – killed by neglect, to our disgrace, this shadow of thy manly face I’m here preserving...” My great-grandfather had been a great friend of this man, and was obviously moved by his death.

I mention all this not only because I am proud of my great-grandfather – though of course I am – but because I think he life is a witness to some of the attitudes that we must have towards reconciliation with Aboriginal people today.

First, he acknowledged in that poem the simple truth that the aboriginal people are “a much-abused race.” State-sanctioned killing of aboriginal people went on – usually in retaliation for the theft of cattle – until the 1920s in Australia. That is a fact that we rarely acknowledge, even though there was a royal commission in 1927 which described “a conspiracy of silence” about the massacres.

Second, he really was open to aboriginal people and willing to invest time in getting to know them. He may have had a gift for languages, yes – but it still took an enormous investment in time to learn Mickey’s language. My grandfather was a strong advocate of using aboriginal place-names. (He wrote a poem about that, too, by the way.) In acknowledging that there were actually the names of places, he was acknowledging that aboriginal people were the true custodians of the land.

In this, he was not alone, but he was also not unopposed. I have seen the Hansard of a debate in the Legislative Council of NSW about aboriginal place names. When one member ridiculed them, there were some who cried “Shame!” but many others who laughed and applauded.

Sometimes we hear it said, “Why don’t aboriginal people just move on and forget the past?” Whenever I am present at an aboriginal “Welcome to Country”

ceremony – and they are more common now – I have the thought that aboriginal people have indeed moved on. They do not seek revenge; they are willing to welcome others, including newcomers, into their lives. They know that the way ahead lies in cooperation and reconciliation. But that has to be based and founded on the truth, not on denial or forgetfulness.

And that brings us back to Sunday's Gospel, if you remember. Jesus began his preaching mission with a call to repent. Most of us know more about the wars against the American Indians than we do about the wars and massacres of aboriginal people in our own country. We still have a long way to go in acknowledging the wrongs of the past, until we can say with Isaiah,

*The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light;
on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone.*

True peace is surely our prayer for our country on this Australia Day, and peace is founded on honesty and justice, on mutual respect and on mutual understanding. We must both work and pray for peace.

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