

NAIDOC SUNDAY – 4-5 July 2020

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 had said that he knew several languages. He was a poet and a musician, even a composer of popular songs.

A lot of the scrapbook delighted me, but was 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. Underneath a photo of King Micky he wrote (I quote just a few lines):

Old chieftain of an ill-used race,
(killed by neglect – to our disgrace)
This shadow of thy many face I'm here preserving.
And on this page the highest place
'Tis well deserving.

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Not great poetry, perhaps, but forthright and sincere in its sentiments. 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 his 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 these 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 generally 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

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cooperation and reconciliation. But that has to be based and founded on the truth, not on denial or forgetfulness.

Fr Hilary Martin, who was a member of the Dominican community here at St Dominic's for many years, used to spend months at a time with the people of Wadeye in the Northern Territory. He then lectured – and still does – to share what he learned, and on how our Christian theology can be enriched by the meeting of aboriginal spirituality and Christianity.

“Your interests are not in the unspiritual, but in the spiritual,” St Paul tells the Christians in Rome in today's second reading. Aboriginal people had a deep spiritual sense before white people came here, and many have also heard and embraced what St Paul calls “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord”, which was indeed brought by Europeans. But the Holy Spirit was nevertheless at work among aboriginal people from the beginning, long before the Christian message reached them. As the Second Vatican Council put it, “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in other religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people.”

The first aboriginal deacon, the late Boniface Perdjert, put it this way, “My people existed here in Australia thousands of years before Abraham. In all that time God was with my people. He worked through their culture. He was saving us despite human weakness. He was preparing us for the day when he would see the features of Aboriginals in the image of his Son.” And the Australian Bishops quote him, and go on to say, “It is time we recognised that we need not only a contribution but also the gift of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the Church. It is time too, that Indigenous Australians realise only they can bring that gift to help shape the identity and Mission of the Australian Church.”

[St Dominic's, Camberwell, 4 July, 2020]