

Listening to Scripture - By Prof Stan Grant

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'Vindicate me, O God. And plead my cause against an ungodly nation.' (Psalm 43:1)

I have pondered that passage this year. Especially this year, as we prepare for a referendum on whether my people – First Nations people – should have a Voice in the Constitution. On face value it is a purely bureaucratic reform. The proposal is that Indigenous people should have a representative body to advise parliament on policy directed toward us.

Put that way it sounds procedural. Bloodless. Anaemic. The Constitution is a purely functional document. It is Australia's rule book. There is nothing sacred in the Constitution. Indeed, it is the antithesis of the sacred. Remember the words of Christ. "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God." The Constitution is Caesar's work. We give to it what is demanded of us. We stop at traffic lights and we pay our taxes.

But surely the Voice is something more. It calls us to become right with God.

We must face the harsh judgment of God. We have to atone. We must confront that question: are we an ungodly nation? We are not a Godless nation. We are not a nation without God. We are not a nation of people who do not seek God. But yes, we can indeed be judged an ungodly nation. That is what the scriptures tell us.

"Justice is far from us." (Isaiah 59:9)

"We walk in darkness." (Isaiah 59:9)

Australia's history casts a long shadow.

We are a nation that has sought to erase my people from the Earth. Invaders carrying the gun and the bible massacred my people then locked us away on missions and reserves where it was expected we would die out. The Reverend Samuel Marsden, the eighteenth century colonial New South Wales Church of England chaplain, described Aboriginal people as "the most degraded of the human race...."

He believed we were "irredeemable".

Marsden, like so many of the ruling invaders, believed he was on the side of God. But he could not see God when God was staring back at him through the eyes of my people. We knew God. My people the Wiradjuri had our own word for God: *Baiame*.

God did not arrive on the First Fleet. We lived with God, as God's people in the land God had given us. When the invaders killed us, they were killing God. When they stole from us, they stole from God.

God lives and dies in the afflicted. God died in the death camps of the Holocaust. God died in the Indian Wars of the American plains. God died with us in the frontier wars. God dies wherever God's children are persecuted and killed.

God died with Christ.

We come to God through many faiths. According to my faith the promise of the crucifixion is that we are not alone. We are not forsaken. And God lives with us in our struggle to live on.

When the missionaries came – as they saw it—to “civilise” us, or “Christianise” us, we read the Bible and we read the truth. We read the Gospel of John: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.” (John 10:10)

Jesus came so that we – my people – would have life. He did not come to vindicate the thieves and murderers. God is on the side of justice. The scriptures tell us to “follow justice and justice alone.” (Deuteronomy 16:20) Psalm 89:14 says that righteousness and justice are the foundation of God’s throne.

Nations stray from justice. God is not on the side of unjust nations, however much nations may seek to claim God. As it says in Psalm 9:20: “Strike them with terror, Lord; let the nations know they are only mortal.”

Nations are not above God and they are not above God’s judgment. Nations are judged for their sin. We know that.

Luke says in 12:10 that to speak against the Son of man shall be forgiven but to speak against God will not be forgiven. This nation we now call Australia was founded by those claiming to speak God’s words, but who, in the worst that they did to my people, blasphemed against God.

These are sins to last an eternity.

Jesus judges. He judges the rich and the powerful. Jesus chooses his side. And he is on the side of the suffering. He is on the side of justice. And his is a fierce judgment.

“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10:34)

What does that say to me? Not that Jesus comes to bring war, but to bring a mighty sword of justice. To strike at those in power and defend those afflicted. Time is no substitute for justice. Time will not heal all wounds. The sins are laid at our feet. In Luke 11:51 we are told that this generation will be held responsible for it all.

And yet in the face of suffering. There is hope. In the worst of our history, there is a promise.

Injustice blackens the world, but “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:5) I was raised in the Aboriginal church, among men and women of God. We were steeped in our culture and our faith. They were indivisible.

The Aboriginal political struggle emerged out of the Church. It was driven by those who believed that we, like all people, are made in the image of God.

We believed there was a light in the darkness.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart is a light in the darkness. The Voice emerges from the Uluru Statement. It is a gift from the First Peoples to all others on this land. It comes from a spiritual place. To me, the Uluru Statement is more profound than the Voice. The Voice speaks to politics, but the Uluru Statement speaks to the soul.

In many ways I have felt the political debate about the Voice has stripped the enchantment from the Uluru Statement. What were words of God have become the slogans of politics. Politics too often cheapens us. Worse, these things of Caesar take us farther from God.

The discussion about the Voice has been dominated by the voices of the powerful. Politicians and lawyers speak more loudly in this moment than the voices of the people of God. We are poorer for that. Jesus tells us in Luke 20:46: “Beware of the teachers of the law.” These are the people who seek credit. Who seek power. Who wear fine robes in the marketplace and occupy the best seats in the synagogue. (Luke 20:46)

I have no doubt that some of the lawyers and politicians advocating for the Voice are filled too with God’s love. Yet it is a mighty task to wrest back God from the Caesar.

As I follow this debate, too often I find myself feeling deflated, dispirited. I look for words of righteousness and justice and I hear, sadly, political platitudes, marketing campaigns crafted in strategy meetings. I want to believe that is indeed a moment when we can see “justice run down like water, And righteousness like a mighty stream” (Amos 5:24) but I am reminded that the Voice is a “modest” proposal.

This is what we are reduced to.

We are told it will be a Voice “nothing more, nothing less”. But our people deserve more. Australia deserves more. There is politics and then there is justice. The Voice must be a voice of justice. It will not be silenced. Surely this is a moment to lift the nation’s sight. There is no greater purpose than the fight for the nation’s soul.

We cannot betray the divine purpose of the Voice.

The Voice finds itself hemmed in by the twin existential crises of our time: the loss of faith and the decadence of liberal democracy.

The Voice appeals to representative politics at a time when the democratic world is questioning whether old-school liberalism can possibly answer the questions of a crowded, contested, globalised twenty-first century world.

An obscene wealth gap, racism, misogyny, homophobia, gender inequality and elite capture contribute to shattering liberalism’s illusions of fairness, freedom and equality. Liberal democracies are fractured and fragmented. Public discourse is poisoned by a winner-takes-all culture war.

A wave of political populism has swept opportunists, demagogues and despots into power, all of them preying on fear and anxiety, each promising a return to some imagined glorious past. Each pledging to make their countries great again. There is a loss of trust in the institutions of society. In Australia there have been Royal Commissions into aged care, banking and the church.

Yes. Churches are also complicit in this hollowing out of belief, trust and hope.

In the West religion is in retreat. Churches are cause of scandal. Its leadership too often appearing aloof, judgmental and uncaring. According to the last census nearly forty percent of Australians have no religion. Fewer than forty four percent now say they are Christian.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart seeks to bridge that divide between God – the spirit – and politics. Yet it does so at a time when both faith and politics are being driven to the margins.

The Voice seeks justice via the institutions of democracy when those institutions appear tawdry. The risk for the Voice is that it is captured and doomed by the very liberalism that it seeks to redeem.

I want to reach for something more. I want to reach for God in this moment. This nation faces a reckoning with truth and I believe a reckoning with God. As Isaiah 59:14 warns: ‘Justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter. Our courts oppose the righteous, and justice is nowhere....’

Words like reconciliation and recognition, are hollowed out by politics. Those words are not big enough to carry the weight of our demands for justice.

Instead I turn to affliction.

The French philosopher and Christian mystic, Simone Weil, has taught me of the truth of affliction. It is more than suffering. It is the cold touch of fate. Affliction she said “is anonymous. It deprives the victims of their personality and turns them into things.”

Surely my people felt the cold touch of fate with the invasion of the colonisers. We were stripped of who we were. Deemed barely human.

Affliction Weil said, “is the chill of indifference”. It is “the metallic chill that freezes all those it touches down to the depths of their soul.”

Simone Weil has spoken to me more profoundly this year than any politician or lawyer. She died when she was just in her thirties. But her words are eternal. She said she felt the presence of Jesus Christ enter her soul. It was, she said, as real to her as the smile of a friend.

This year I have turned away from politics and turned towards God. I have felt the presence of Simone Weil as a friend and the presence – the very real felt presence – of Christ.

I have had to contemplate the apparent callousness of God. Where is God in my people's suffering? How could God allow such things to happen? But I find that it is in God's absence that God lives. It is in the fact that the world is imperfect and at times evil that God can be revealed.

For what would God mean in a world of perfection? These are the things Simone Weil contemplated. God may leave the world but God leaves the trace of love. In that love we can find God.

Affliction alone has no significance, Weil said. But in our affliction we endure.

We wait.

This is for me the power of the Voice. It is the voice of those afflicted. It is the voicelessness of those who wait.

The people of this age may be turning away from politics and abandoning religion. But they are not abandoning the divine. We seek the divine everywhere. In a sunset, in music, in art, in birdsong and the touch of each other. We seek it in love.

The Voice must also be the voice of the divine. My people – Wiradjuri – have a word: Yindyamarra. It means to respect; to be gentle, to speak quietly and walk softly.

It is a theology. It is captured in Micah 6:9: "And what does the Lord require of you but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

The Uluru Statement was an invitation to walk together for a better future; to walk humbly with God. The Voice must not lose the trace of the divine. Politics has its place, but we must speak of God too in this moment.

I pray for God's touch to fill with courage the hearts of those fighting for justice. I pray that Australians can truly see us as they never have, to see in us God's love.

Because the First Nations – people of God in the land God gave us – offers a way to bring the nation closer to God. Closer to justice.

We cannot look only to the law or politics for the justice we seek. Christ was judged by law and died at the hands of law, but he died and rose to free us from earthly law. Laws change, nations fall, but love and justice are eternal.

"For if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing." (Galatians 2:21)

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