



Fr Frank Brennan SJ:

## Homily for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday

*'There'll be no healing of the country, there'll be no constitutional recognition, and there'll be no truth telling unless more of us hear the call. 'The spirit came into me and made me stand up, and I heard the Lord speaking to me.'*

Homily for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday, 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time.  
Delivered at Newman College, University of Melbourne by Fr Frank Brennan SJ, Rector.  
Ezekiel 2:2-5; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Mark 6:1-6

**Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/frank-brennan-6/aboriginal-sunday-2021>**

Today is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday. The theme is 'Heal Country'. Adopting this theme, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) tell us, 'Today our world is in need of healing – environmentally, spiritually and socially. We must all come together as a global community to fight the injustices of inequality, racism and environmental damage.'

In today's gospel, Jesus goes back to his hometown where the locals are astonished, wondering where Jesus could have got his wisdom and his healing powers. After all they knew his family and just how ordinary they were, just how like them they were. Jesus declares, 'A prophet is only despised in his own country among his own relations and in his own house.' Like the prophet in today's first reading from Ezekiel, we are invited even amongst our own mob to reflect, 'The spirit came into me and made me stand up, and I heard the Lord speaking to me.' To heal country, we are invited to take a stand. We are commissioned to stand apart from the mob.

Four years ago, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders from the length and breadth of the country gathered at Uluru and published their 'Statement from the Heart' calling for 'the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution'. Declaring their aspiration for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia, they called for 'truth-telling about our history'. The Voice and truth-telling are the ideas of the moment which hold the key to healing our country.

Senator Andrew Bragg is one of a new breed of federal politicians who has a commitment to Aboriginal rights across party lines and beyond the old contours of debate. He has just published his book *Buraadja: The Liberal Case for National Reconciliation*. Senator Bragg has been impressed by the plea of Chris Sarra, who chaired the Turnbull government's Indigenous Advisory Council, that governments stop doing things *to* Indigenous people and start doing things *with* them.<sup>[1]</sup> When Sarra retired from the Council, he said, 'We shifted from the rhetoric of doing things to Indigenous people to a strength-based approach and doing things with people.'<sup>[2]</sup>

Bragg confronts the difficulty of achieving constitutional reform in Australia, knowing that his Liberal Party has been much more successful than the Labor Party amending the Constitution. We've had only eight successful referenda out of 44 attempts in 120 years. Change doesn't come unless all major political parties are on board. When it comes to any constitutional change related to Indigenous recognition, Bragg acknowledges: 'Ultimately, the drafting of the constitutional amendment needs to ensure that the Constitution requires consultation with Indigenous people.'<sup>[3]</sup> How is this to be done when it comes to the Uluru demand for 'the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution' ?

Bragg writes: 'An amendment for a detailed body that is set out in the Constitution has no chance of being passed at a referendum.'<sup>[4]</sup> He favours the 'setting out (of) an obligation to consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people' together with the establishment of the Voice by legislation.<sup>[5]</sup> He concludes, 'It may well be the case that the only way to get a Voice up and running – and guaranteed in the Constitution – is through a gradual approach.'<sup>[6]</sup>

Aboriginal leaders like Professor Megan Davis who played a key role at Uluru warned this week that 'if you legislate, it's like a pinprick in a balloon; you will deflate entirely the constitutional recognition momentum.' Professor Davis is adamant: 'The idea that you can just road test this for five years and all of a sudden go to referendum is simply not true. If the body is successful, there is no government that is going to want to enshrine something that keeps it accountable. If the body is not successful, then people simply won't see any point to enshrining a Voice in the Constitution. There is no good logic for legislating first.'<sup>[7]</sup>

The road ahead to constitutional recognition is long, winding, and fog bound. What's essential is that intelligent committed actors of good will like Senator Bragg and Professor Davis work co-operatively for a strength-based approach, trusting each other and doing things together. Davis will have a better sense of what her people want; Bragg will have a better sense of what his political colleagues will agree to.

Meanwhile where are we with 'truth-telling about our history'? Many Australians have been impressed and moved by the writings of Bruce Pascoe, especially his book *Dark Emu* in which he writes: 'It seems improbable that a country can continue to hide from the actuality of its history in order to validate the fact that having said sorry, we refuse to say thanks.'<sup>[8]</sup>

Pascoe insists that 'the start of that journey is to allow the knowledge that Aboriginal people did build houses, did cultivate and irrigate crops, did sew clothes, and were not hapless wanderers across the soil, mere hunter-gatherers.'<sup>[9]</sup> He tells us, 'To deny Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agricultural and spiritual achievement is the single greatest impediment to intercultural understanding and, perhaps, to Australian moral wellbeing and economic prosperity.'<sup>[10]</sup>

The esteemed anthropologist Peter Sutton and the archaeologist Keryn Walshe have challenged Pascoe's version of the truth. They have published an academic rejoinder *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers? The Dark Emu Debate*. These academics rightly claim: *Dark Emu* 'is actually not, properly considered, a work of scholarship. Its success as a narrative has been achieved in spite of its failure as an account of fact.'

Stuart Rintoul is a very accomplished journalist who has recently published the acclaimed biography of Lowitja O'Donoghue. He interviewed Sutton and Walshe with great sensitivity, wanting to avoid unnecessary politicisation of the debate about the truthfulness of *Dark Emu*. Peter Sutton told Rintoul that their aim was to 'set things back to a balanced truthfulness' and 'restore the dignity of complex (never "mere") hunter-gathering, and thus First Nations cultural history, that has been eroded due to *Dark Emu*.'<sup>[11]</sup>

Responding to the academic criticism, Pascoe writes: '*Dark Emu* has encouraged many Australians to recognise the ingenuity and sophistication of the many Aboriginal cultures, societies and land-management practices, which had not previously been brought to mainstream attention. The extent of Aboriginal social and economic organisation has been surprising to many Australians and a nuanced debate needs to be ongoing.'

Sutton believes that 'reading and accepting *Dark Emu* has become a search for "moral recovery" for some white Australians of goodwill'. Walshe says 'it has become something like "a pilgrimage".' Both of them write: 'The authority of the academy has slipped. Much worse than that, the authority of Aboriginal knowledge-holders has been ignored yet again.'

The historian James Boyce has bought into the academic debate now raging about *Dark Emu*. He says, '*Dark Emu*'s deepest resonance is not with a discredited progress narrative, but with matters of the heart.' He says:

'It is legitimate for settler Australians to be seeking stories about the most urgent question of our times: how to live with integrity on this threatened earth. There will be stupidity and superficiality in this discussion, but it is important not to dismiss the quest. Accessible and nuanced stories are needed to inform not just our understanding of the continent's past but also the burning conversation about its future.'<sup>[12]</sup>

We need the academics like Sutton and Walshe. But we also need evocative writers like Pascoe. The road ahead to truth-telling is also long, winding, and fog bound.

As we pray for the healing of our country this Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday, let's thank God that we live in a country where Aboriginal leaders like Chris Sarra and Megan Davis can be heard, where elected politicians like Andrew Bragg can find the space and political moment to write, and where thinkers like Bruce Pascoe, Stuart Rintoul, Keryn Walshe and Peter Sutton can respectfully call us all to

account for our past and our commitment to the future. Let's remember that Jesus was not alone when he reflected, 'A prophet is only despised in his own country among his own relations and in his own house.' There'll be no healing of the country, there'll be no constitutional recognition, and there'll be no truth telling unless more of us hear the call: 'The spirit came into me and made me stand up, and I heard the Lord speaking to me.'

*Fr Frank Brennan SJ is a member of the Commonwealth Government's 19-member Senior Advisory Group overseeing the Co-Design process for the Indigenous Voice. The Group is chaired by Aboriginal leaders Marcia Langton and Tom Calma.*

Main image: Members of the general public write messages on art boards at Hyde Park on July 13, 2019 in Sydney, Australia during NAIDOC Week. Photo by Jenny Evans/Getty Images.

**[1]** Andrew Bragg, *Buraadja: The Liberal Case for National Reconciliation*, The Kapunda Press, 2021, p. 86

**[2]** See <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-06-28/prime-minister-indigenous-adviser-chris-sarra-resigns/9919920>

**[3]** Andrew Bragg, *Buraadja: The Liberal Case for National Reconciliation*, The Kapunda Press, 2021, p. 167

**[4]** Ibid, p. 168

**[5]** Ibid.

**[6]** Ibid, p. 171

**[7]** ABC, *Law Report*, 29 June 2021, available at <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lawreport/overwhelming-support-for-indigenous-voice-in-constitution/13401840>

**[8]** Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu*, Magabala Books, 2014, 2018 edition, p. 228

**[9]** Ibid, p. 229

**[10]** Ibid

**[11]** Stuart Rintoul, *Debunking Dark Emu: Did the Publishing Phenomenon Get It Wrong?*, *The Good Weekend, Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 June 2021 available at <https://www.smh.com.au/national/debunking-dark-emu-did-the-publishing-phenomenon-get-it-wrong-20210507-p57pyl.html>

**[12]** James Boyce, 'Transforming the National Imagination', *The Monthly*, July 2021, 56 at p.60