

Fr Frank's Homily – 21 August 2022

By Fr Frank Brennan SJ, 20 August 2022



Thousands of aboriginal protesters and supporters demanded justice for black deaths in custody in a protest march through Sydney's CBD on 10 April 2021. Image: Shutterstock.

Homily for the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C.

Readings: Isaiah 66:18-21; Psalm 116 (117); Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13; Luke 13:22-30
21 August 2022

Luke's gospel is addressed to a community well used to the debates in Judaism about whether all the Chosen People would be saved, or just a remnant. The scripture scholars tell us that in today's gospel, Luke turns a theoretical challenge into an existential challenge. In response to the question, "Lord, will only a few people be saved?", Jesus offers "a warning not to miss the opportunity while it is still available", and this "functions as a prophetic warning to repentance". The message is: get through the door while you can. Repent now and put right your relations here and now. Admit your mistakes and be reconciled as soon as possible.

LISTEN: <https://soundcloud.com/frank-brennan-6/homily-21822>

We've been treated to another week in Australian politics when politicians get themselves into ever deeper waters by not admitting their mistakes and repenting here and now. It's the lack of transparency, obfuscation, and rationalisations which cause them even more problems than the initial error or shortcoming.

Striving to enter through the narrow gate requires more than just common sense and self-interested political savvy. We all have a history. We are all part of a history – a history of society, of nation, and of Church and other institutions. Our sense of right evolves, and in hindsight, we wonder how we or our forebears could have been so blind.

This week, John Howard has been promoting his latest book *A Sense of Balance*. Revisiting his refusal as Prime Minister to apologise for the past treatment and ongoing suffering of the Stolen Generations, he writes, "One generation cannot apologise for the alleged misdeeds of an earlier one." Speaking at the National Press Club, he said that he stood by his opposition to the national apology delivered in the Parliament by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and seconded by Opposition Leader Brendan Nelson in 2008: "The idea that one prime minister apologises for the mistakes of a former one, I just think there is a phoniness in that."

Those of us who are like the people in today's gospel find ourselves often trying to make up for lost time, well after the horse has bolted. "Lord, open the door for us." Remember! "We ate and drank in your company and you taught in our streets." But did we actually hear the teaching back then? Or were we

blinkered? If we were so blinkered then, what guarantee is there that we are not still blinkered now, and about what issues?

When it comes to us as a society apologising for phenomena like the Stolen Generations, it not just a matter of apologising for the past deeds of others. It's also a matter of apologising for distorted perspectives from the past that have endured to the present, and for past blindness to truth and justice with enduring effects today – attitudes that endured for all too long, and effects that will remain with us for generations. We are apologising that we are part of, and responsible for, the society which collectively inherits the strengths and weaknesses, the achievements and failures of earlier generations. We are the ones who continue to profit from the past dispossession. That's why I was pleased that the Fifth Plenary Council of the Australian Catholic Church said "sorry to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in and beyond the Church for the part played by the Church in the harms they have suffered" and committed us as Church "to walk with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in continuing to work towards recognition, reconciliation and justice".[\[1\]](#)

This week, I had cause to reflect on our past and enduring blindness when delivering the annual Newman Lecture at Mannix College at Monash University. Daniel Mannix arrived in Melbourne from Ireland in 1912. He became Archbishop of Melbourne in 1917 – a role he fulfilled for 56 years, until 1963. Mannix was always his own man and he had an innate Irish sense of justice, especially when it came to adverse discrimination practised by those who exercised power together with privilege. Given my topic, 'The Path to a Referendum: From Uluru via Garma to Canberra and on to the People', I thought it worth tracing some of Mannix's steps, recalling just how far we have come as well as how far we still need to go, addressing the outstanding claims of First Australians to justice and recognition.[\[2\]](#)

In 1933, there were still serious suggestions of a punitive expedition to Arnhem Land to deal with Aborigines alleged to have killed some whites. Archbishop Mannix had cause to send a telegram to the Catholic Prime Minister Joe Lyons on 5 September 1933. It read: "Prime Minister, Canberra: With I hope majority of Australians I would regard the punitive expedition with grave misgivings and the possible result with horror. Archbishop Mannix."[\[3\]](#) The punitive expedition did not go ahead.

In January 1938, Mannix attended the opening of the Pallotines' missionary college in Kew, just a short distance from the archbishop's residence Raheen. The Pallotines had opened Aboriginal missions in the Kimberley. Prime Minister Lyons was in attendance. The Argus newspaper reported: "Mr. Lyons said that a wonderful story had been told of the sacrifices made by the missionary fathers in working for the conversion of the aborigines. He was present to show the appreciation of the Government to the Pallottine Fathers for their work. There had been much criticism of the Government in regard to the treatment of the blacks, and it had aroused the conscience of the public to the necessity for doing more for the aborigines than had been done previously. In the near future the Commonwealth Government would deal with the question. In a few days a conference of the aborigines would be held in Sydney, and, following the conference, a deputation of aborigines would wait on him. The Ministry would do its best to wipe out whatever reproach remained in regard to the treatment of the blacks."

The newspaper report continued: "Some who claimed to be experts said the blacks should not be interfered with so far as religious matters were concerned, said Mr. Lyons. Religion was their most precious possession, and surely Australians would not deny to the aborigines, to whom they owed so much, participation in it."[\[4\]](#) Prime Ministers of all political persuasions have been saying this sort of thing for almost a century.

Archbishop Mannix also spoke at the opening of the Pallottine college. He "said that Australia was beginning to make reparation to the aborigines for all the wrongs, wittingly or unwittingly, they had inflicted upon them. It was encouraging that Australian youths were already offering themselves for service in the Kimberley mission fields. The blacks should be encouraged to live according to their own culture, and to be a credit to White Australia."[\[5\]](#) Our bishops have been saying these sorts of things for almost a century.

In April 1940, the Catholic Bishops of Australia issued their first social justice statement. Every year since then, the bishops have chosen a topic for the statement which is circulated in all parishes on Social Justice Sunday in September. The launch of the first statement on capital and labour was a grand affair in Melbourne. Mannix's opening remarks were quite arresting. He said: "We have come here tonight to talk about social justice, or to listen to others talking about it. I wonder if anybody else in the hall who talked and thought of social justice thought that we owed something in the matter of social justice to the aborigines of Australia. I believe in social justice, but I believe in it all round. I do know that the aborigines of Australia would be able to furnish a very strong indictment against the present rulers and

inhabitants of Australia and those who have gone before us. I hope, if social justice ever comes, that it will reach them as it reaches the rest of us.”[6]

A year later, he was back at the Pallotine College for their annual fete. The Argus reported: “White people in Australia had committed the original sin against the aborigines Archbishop Mannix said The original sin he was afraid had not yet been blotted out. The Pallottine Fathers were doing their part to bring redemption to us from our original sin which had brought suffering to the black people.”[7]

When Mannix received reports that bomb tests were to be conducted on Aboriginal lands in the Kimberley he took the opportunity at the 1946 Pallotine fete to express his displeasure. Once again, The Argus reported: “The fear that bomb experiments might harm aborigines in the Kimberley areas was expressed by Archbishop Mannix when he opened a fete at the Pallottine Missionary College, Kew, on Saturday. The aborigines were not likely to take kindly to the destruction of their old haunts, he said. The Government should be ‘careful with the experiments, and not remove natives from their old roaming ground, where apparently they found happiness and contentment’.”[8]

I think Mannix would be well pleased that our recently concluded Plenary Council “affirmed overwhelmingly the Uluru Statement from the Heart and the calls for bipartisan constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians”[9]. Hearing Mannix’s prophetic utterances 80 years after they were made, we wonder why it’s as if he was never heard by those hundreds of thousands of Catholics who hung on his every word on a vast array of topics, not just theology and internal church matters. To which prophetic utterances are we decent church goers deaf today? Let’s heed Jesus’ words: “I do not know where you are from. Depart from me, all you evildoers!”

And there will be wailing and grinding of teeth

when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

and all the prophets in the kingdom of God

and you yourselves cast out.

And people will come from the east and the west

and from the north and the south

and will recline at table in the kingdom of God.

For behold, some are last who will be first,

and some are first who will be last.

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[1] Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, Decree: Reconciliation: Healing Wounds, Receiving Gifts, 2022.

[2] The lecture is available at <https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article/the-path-to-a-referendum-from-uluru-via-garma-to-canberra-and-on-to-the-people>. An extract is available at <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/why-their-voice-must-be-heard/news-story/bff90c222c1f769bb5035220d977b8ad>

[3] James Franklin et al (eds.), *The Real Archbishop Mannix from the Sources*, Connor Court, 2015, p. 179

[4] *The Argus*, 24 January 1938, p.4

[5] *Ibid*

[6] 'Capital and Labour Both Victims of a System', Archbishop Mannix's Address, The Advocate, 25 April 1940, p.5

[7] The Argus, 17 November 1941, p.6

[8] The Argus, 9 December 1946, p.3

[9] Plenary Council, Concluding Statement – A Final Word from the Second Assembly, 9 July 2022.