

I want to begin by acknowledging the First Nations peoples, the first inhabitants of this land. The Aboriginal and Islander peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land, revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways. Today, they are gracious enough to seek continued relationship with those of us whose forebears have invaded, colonised, and decimated their lifestyle. We recognise their persistence, resilience and determination, and abundant grace. For this, we give thanks. Let us also acknowledge with gratitude the members of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, with whom the Uniting Church stands in solidarity, in covenant relationship as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Greetings to you in the name of God, our brother Jesus and the abiding Holy Spirit.

The text set for today describes Jesus' first public act of ministry recorded in Luke's Gospel (Luke 4:14-21), when Jesus is in the synagogue, and given the scroll of Isaiah to read. Now, if he had been asked to read from the Torah, the first 5 books of the Hebrew Scriptures, he would have been obliged to read it word for word. But since he was tasked to read from the scroll of Isaiah he had some liberty to weave other texts into the reading. That's what's happened in the words recorded in Luke's narrative. Jesus weaves together two verses from Isaiah 61, and one from Isaiah 58:6, linked by the use of the word 'release' (*aphesis* in Greek) in relation to releasing the prisoner and releasing the oppressed: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (vv 18-19, NRSV)

It is likely that this section of Isaiah was written after the Hebrew people had returned to Jerusalem from exile and their captivity in Babylon. The joy they would have had in finally returning to their home city would have quickly evaporated when they saw the destruction, and realised the massive rebuilding program that was needed.

I have in my mind this week vivid images of the destruction caused by the devastating explosion of the volcano in Tonga and the massive rebuilding and clean up that will be required. I urge you to uphold our Tongan friends in prayerful and practical ways as they clean up and rebuild. It will be a long, laborious task.

For the Hebrew people returning to Jerusalem it meant having to start again. What social and spiritual foundations would they need for their communal life going forward? Or, the question we need to continually ask, how then should we live? This is where Isaiah writes about proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free - as the basis for a fresh start for the Hebrew community. A cycle of release and starting again.

Jesus also references the concept of the year of the Lord's favour, or Jubilee, from Leviticus 25:10. The jubilee was to be a year of release - that's the connection, release. All debts would be cancelled, all prisoners freed, fields would be rested, and everyone who had lost land in hard times in the previous five decades could reclaim their ancestral property. Basically, it was an opportunity for the Hebrew people to rest, and reset, so that injustice would not continue into perpetuity, that people could have a fresh start after hard times. The practice of Jubilee intended to keep at the forefront of community consciousness the imperative for justice, for a fair distribution of wealth and personal freedoms, to seek the common good and release from social and economic oppression.

You may have heard this week that the 10 richest men in the world more than doubled their fortunes in the COVID pandemic while incomes of 99% of humanity fell, with over 160 million more people forced into poverty, and that that same inequality contributes to the death of one person every 4 seconds. Oxfam International's Executive Director Gabriela Bucher: "If these 10 men were to lose 99.999% of their wealth tomorrow, they would still be richer than 99% of all the people on this planet. They now have 6 times more wealth than the poorest 3.1 billion people (in the world)."

Wow.

That's what we're talking about with Jubilee - the need to ensure a fair redistribution of wealth. You won't be surprised that the year of the Lord's favour was apparently not embraced and enacted by the Hebrew people. It's not difficult to imagine the resistance of those who have accumulated much in the way of wealth, privilege, property and power to the idea that they relinquish some or all of it for the common good of others. The prophet Isaiah imagined the rebuilding of Jerusalem through Jubilee, an opportunity for freedom and equity in shared wealth. And Jesus slips this reference to the practice of Jubilee from the book of Leviticus when he is handed the scroll of Isaiah to read.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. whose birthday was celebrated in this past week, famously said "no one is free until we are all free." One's own freedom is bound up in our neighbour's, in recognizing our interconnectedness. When Jesus proclaims the Jubilee, it is meant to signal a great cosmic make-over. Much like the Magnificat that his mother Mary sang. Luke's Gospel makes the point over and over again that Jesus' mission was not business as usual, but rather proclaiming the ever-inbreaking-but-as-yet-not-fully-realized Reign of God where all things will be made new.

The reading references "recovery of sight to the blind". I wonder how much that blindness relates to a lack of understanding, or even a lack of willingness to see and understand. There is none so blind as the one who will not see. Being willing to see things as they truly are is challenging. It's also challenging to be willing to see anew *what could be*, as systems and structures and practices and first principles are reshaped in our local and global community, as we lean into what it means to be part of God's beloved community. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others used the language of Beloved Community to describe the experience of God's kingdom in our lives today: moments of reconciliation and joy that break in and rebuke our racial and social divisions. Dr. King's Beloved Community was a global vision, in which all people could share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness would not be tolerated because international standards of human decency would not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice would be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, international disputes would be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust would triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice would prevail over war and military conflict. This is what the Reign of God looks like in practice.

The words Jesus speaks as he begins his public ministry should leap off the page as we hear them afresh in our time and place. There are challenges - and there are opportunities. What might the 'recovery of sight' mean for those who have been unwilling to see things as they really are? When we see, we cannot unsee.

We need to then ask, what do we need to stop doing, keep doing, start doing, do differently?

Today the UCA acknowledges the Day of Mourning, to reflect on the effects of invasion and colonisation of Australia's First Peoples. The Day of Mourning was brought to the attention of the church at the request of our sisters and brothers in the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC). Second Peoples have the opportunity to see with eyes wide open the injustices and oppression that have been the experience of Aboriginal people, and to lament that systems and structures have benefitted some while denying and oppressing others.

The 2022 Day of Mourning resources includes this invitation to Truth-Telling:

Loving and living in harmony with the Land, caring for Mother Earth, Mother Earth caring for and with ceremony, story lines, song lines, customs, traditions, tribes, nations and clans.

What now sits within the coloniser's hands?

What intergenerational mourning and healing is about to unfold?

To know mourning is to know grief and loss - removal of lands, removal of children.

The injustice of the declaration of terra nullius - the dispossession, the invasion, the colonial rule, the colonial persuasion.

Dig deep into the layers of the mourning.

Layers of mourning unfold in the stories not told.

The wailing of a mother, as a child is taken away. The relocation to country far away

The connections lost, the connections severed.

To know mourning is to truly know injustice.

We seek guidance from ancient wisdom of past and present,

To hold this mourning in our hearts and minds, to honour, to pay respect, to know, to appreciate and to act on injustice.

Today we mourn, but we together must action much more interwoven unlearning, interwoven truth-telling, interwoven restoring of justice.

We have an inherent call from the Creator to justice - it's called for us all, a call to an ongoing woven mat of justice, truth-telling and covenanting.

Rev Dr Denise Champion, Aunty Denise, a Deacon in the UCA and an Adnyamathanha woman speaks of the new community toward which we are called as the Uniting Church: "I have been challenged, in my work in facilitating reconciliation between First and Second Peoples, to create a safe community. A community where people can come together, sit and talk, and experience healing and forgiveness for the past, finding a new destiny together". Friends, let us live into our covenant relationship into which we have entered as First and Second Peoples, to stand together with, and listen to the wisdom of First Nations people in their struggle for justice, to affirm the sovereignty of First Peoples and honour their culture and their connection to country.

Let us confront and challenge injustice wherever we see it. To act justly ourselves and insist that others do the same. To lean into the spirit of jubilee and the release of those weighed down by injustice and oppression. To rejoice in the richness of our diverse cultures and learn from them. To celebrate and demonstrate the unity we share in Jesus Christ, until God's promised reconciliation of all creation is complete.

May we each day embrace the truth-telling of the lands we walk on, the lands invaded, lands never ceded, and together weave a basket of shared healing. Not just for today, not just for tomorrow, not just for yesterday, but in the now and the forever time. The God of all justice, the God of all peace, be with you all. Amen.