

## “Derrimut, William, Doug & Us” – Aboriginal Sunday

(Luke 4:14-21 – Sermon preached at Footscray Baptist on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022)

The young man Jesus, the son of Joseph the local cabinet maker stands up to read the scripture and give a kind of homily in the middle of worship – quite normal for his day. Surprising all by his ability and knowledge, here was the boy next door, who they had known for thirty years, speaking in ways they could hardly imagine.

The congregation it appeared, were quite impressed with his teaching, initially at least. First, he announces that the prophecy from Isaiah had been fulfilled in him and then he continues to expound on that. The mood in the crowd then turns from pleasant surprise to downright anger, as he suggests that God is concerned for all, not just Israel. Gentiles being included in the plan of God did not sit easily with the crowd.

In the passage we have before us Luke sets out the "Jesus Agenda". Luke using the quotes from Isaiah tells us what the basis, nature and results of Jesus' ministry will be.

The nature of Jesus' ministry is in the terms of the quote from Isaiah: - to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom to the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. This is the ministry that Jesus will exercise in both word and deed.

The results of this ministry are also foreshadowed. Jesus' ministry and the love and care of God will extend well beyond the borders of his hometown, to all people, Gentiles included. It is this aspect that makes the crowd really angry. The other result foreshadowed is that Jesus will be rejected.

Each of the aspects, referred to in the "Jesus Agenda", concern different human situations - poverty, captivity, blindness and oppression.

This agenda of Jesus has as its core - liberation, freedom from whatever holds you down and stops you from being whole and loving and lovable. If that is the agenda of Jesus, then the proclamation of the church, that is us, is the same.

Today on Aboriginal Sunday I would like to focus on three men who in some ways lived out this agenda.

### 1. Derrimut<sup>1</sup>

We live in suburbs where the local area and streets are named Derrimut but, do we know who he was? Derrimut lived from about 1810-1864. He was a local aboriginal leader and along with his friends Benbow and Billibellary, as an act of hospitality, warned John Fawkner and his party of an impending attack from other aboriginal tribes, thus preventing a massacre. He became an important negotiator with the early white settlers. He lived in two worlds though – he also fought to protect the rights for aboriginal people to live on their own land. He saved white lives and yet mourned the lost land of the first nations people.

### 2. William Cooper<sup>2</sup>

You may have heard of William. He lived from about 1860-1941 and has a Footscray connection. He was a Yorta Yorta man from up on the Murray river. From 1874 he lived at the Maloga Mission on the Murray and in 1884 he became the last one in his family to convert to Christianity. His faith, especially the story of the Exodus encouraged him in his fight for equality for first nations people. He helped author the Maloga Petition in 1887 which sought Aboriginal rights, particularly land rights. He felt the original occupants of the land should be adequately catered for. In 1933 when he learned he was ineligible to get a pension because he lived on an Aboriginal mission, he moved to Footscray where he continued his work as an activist. In 1935 he helped establish the Australian Aboriginal League; sought direct representation in parliament and land rights. A number of religious people helped him in his cause. He called for an Aboriginal Sunday in 1940 which has continued in some form until now and was a forerunner to NAIDOC week. He also objected to the cruel persecution of the Jewish people by the Nazi regime and is still held in high regard by them. The William Cooper Cup is played at the Whitten Oval every year between the Aboriginal All Stars & Victoria police.

### 3. Doug Nicholls<sup>3</sup>

You are more likely to have heard of Pastor (and later Governor) Doug Nicholls. Also, a Yorta Yorta man, and the nephew of William Cooper. He lived between 1906 – 1988,

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<sup>1</sup> Sourced from Wikipedia

<sup>2</sup> ibid

<sup>3</sup> ibid

making him a contemporary of my grandfather. He was also well known as an AFL player for a number of clubs but remembered mostly for playing for Fitzroy. He became secretary of the Australian Aborigines League and using his fame as a footballer was involved in the Day of Mourning in 1938, which led to an almost 30 year movement resulting in the Referendum of 1967. He worked as a Christian minister and social worker, caring for those trapped in alcohol abuse, gambling and other social problems. He was the first pastor of the Aboriginal Churches of Christ. He set up hostels for Aboriginal children and holiday homes for Aboriginal people.

Three men who in their own ways lived out the ‘Jesus agenda’, fighting to free people from what bound them. Freedom to the captives, good news to the poor.

So, what does all this have to do with us? What can we do? Sometimes we think not much, but that is not true. In the 1860’s the Collins Street Baptist church set up a school for aboriginal children on Yarra Bend, even securing government funding for such. If you walk along the path near Dights Falls in Abbotsford you can still see the remnants of the buildings.

What can we do to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, sight to the blind and the year of God’s favour in our community and especially amongst our first peoples?

If I might say, we can do a lot and often it is simple acts. As I look back over my life, I have found many intersections with the indigenous community that I didn’t go looking for, but perhaps they came looking for me. In the 1980’s I travelled to New South Wales and stayed at an Aboriginal Children’s Home for a few weeks, I went to help paint the buildings but all I did for two weeks was play with the children. In the 1990’s I coached a volleyball team for young offenders which had a number of indigenous players. Later in that decade I met the Rev Graham Paulson (the first indigenous Baptist pastor in Australia) and his family and shared a house with one of them for a time. In my time at Baptcare I ended up having a number of indigenous clients even though we had very few. All of these experiences opened my eyes to the plight of our first nations people and helped me consolidate my commitment to working for justice for them.

In 2018 I found myself at the mission at Hermannsburg, the place where Albert Namitjira (the famous painter) lived. I sat in the chapel (a picture of which is on the

screen) and found myself crying, crying out to God, lamenting what had happened to our first nations people and confessing any part I had played in the injustices they still suffer. I left that place with a renewed commitment to live out the ‘Jesus agenda’, to find ways to bring freedom to those around.

On this Aboriginal Sunday let us look back and remember but also look forward and commit ourselves to acting, just little steps – learning about indigenous people from the area, looking at their art and trying to understand it, taking opportunities to engage with indigenous people when they come our way, educating ourselves about the issues and praying for reconciliation and justice for all. That is the Jesus way.

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<sup>i</sup> Information taken from Wikipedia