

## **Learning from Indigenous Brothers and Sisters**

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020 – Psalm 23 & 1 Cor 12)

I was born on Wathuring land, that is Geelong. I grew up hearing the stories of William Buckley and how he lived with the local indigenous people for decades. That is really all I knew about the indigenous people of Australia. I have however in the last thirty years had the opportunity and great privilege to have met some extraordinary indigenous people – some famous, some not.

In my previous job I have cared for a number of older indigenous people.

All of these people have shown me great hospitality and have taught me something of great significance.

Let me introduce you to some of them.

In 1986 I went with a friend to New South Wales in the summer holidays to help out at the Aboriginal Inland Mission at Bomaderry near Nowra. We had gone to paint the buildings at the Children's Home. For the next week or so I did absolutely no painting, but spent my time playing, swimming and doing activities with the children living there. These children and those caring for them showed me such hospitality, love and acceptance. We laughed and laughed. One young man was learning dot painting and I spent hours watching him as he explained what he was painting. I took the children to the local swimming pool and remember one day when seated with a toddler, another of the group burst out laughing saying she was looking at rice bubble and cocoa pops. They took me to the beach to paddle in the ocean, they showed me Wreck Bay where many of their family lived and took me to my one and only indigenous church service. I will never forget tramping at night through a paddock to an old tin shed filled with hay bales and older indigenous men singing and playing guitar – so much better than the 'white service' I had attended earlier that morning. The people were warm and friendly and faith felt earthy.

One of the carer's had been brought up at the home and returned to care for the next generation. Years later I was reading a book about the stolen generation and as I finished one chapter and started the next, I found 'Aunty Alice' looking at back me from the pages. She, I had just discovered was part of the stolen generation, her story was positive and talked about the good time she had growing up at the home. I couldn't believe it and spent many years coming to terms with the fact that I had spent weeks with indigenous people who were part of the stolen generation. Years later, in 2018, I found myself sitting in the church at the Hermannsberg Mission near Alice Springs, making my confession to God for any part I had played in that awful government policy.

Aunty Iris is a great hostess and cook. She has taught me much about the stolen generation. She grew up on the Cherbourg Mission (quite notorious) in Queensland and at the age of sixteen went to work as a 'domestic'. Even in her late 70's she still hasn't received the wages due to her, she was supposed to be paid 5 pounds per week but only received 2. Despite the hardship she maintained a down to earth faith. She still carries with her, her exemption card which allowed her to travel and marry freely but which could be revoked at any time. She once paid me the compliment that I was white on the outside but black inside.

Aunty Iris is married to Uncle Graham. Uncle Graham was the first indigenous man to be ordained a Baptist Minister in Australia. Some of his ancestors arrived in Australia from Vanuatu as 'blackbirds'. These people were brought here effectively as slaves to cut the cane sugar in Queensland. Uncle Graham taught me how to read the bible differently, to read it from the perspective of the outside and the little people. He taught me that the experience of the Canaanite woman paralleled the experience of indigenous people in Australia – ignored, turned away and abused. He also taught me about how friendship changes attitudes. One day he talked to my father for hours. Dad had grown up, in a world where indigenous people were looked down on. At the end of their meeting Uncle Graham handed Dad a hat to use when gardening, it had a reconciliation logo on it. Later when his relatives questioned him about the hat and where he got it from, he proudly said – my aboriginal friend gave it to him. (Show hat)

Mark Yettica Paulson is their son. Mark and I studied together at Whitley College in the 1990s. Later in the 2010's we were deacons together at Brunswick Baptist. Mark has held leadership roles with the AFL, Recognise and won the ABC show 'Strictly Speaking'. As students we spent hours talking about reconciliation in Australia, the plight of indigenous people in Australia and the plight of women in the church. He shared his hopes and dreams and ways of how we might all walk together into the future. He taught me about the importance of listening to the other voices, often the quiet voices and standing up for injustice. He taught me how to see things from different perspectives. This is a photo of Mark, Uncle Graham and Mark's daughter Tavina who I taught as a young girl in Sunday school.

In the 1990's I did volunteer work with young offenders. A number of them, unsurprisingly, given the incarceration rate of indigenous people, were indigenous.

I remember one young man who was good at sport, agile, fast. He was the youngest person at that time to be in prison for manslaughter – a horrible accident gone wrong. I make no excuses for him, but he was a kind young man. He was honest, he had had a hard life, one dead parent, the other not around. He was brought up by his grandmother. He talked to me about being the victim of racial profiling. He used to call me 'grandma' in his indigenous language – as a woman in her mid-twenties I was horrified, until, I was invited to his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday party. As I sat there, I watched him with his grandmother – he adored her, she was the only mother he had ever really known. His name for me was not an insult, rather, it was the highest compliment he could make. He taught me about family.

I have met Lowitja O'Donohue on several occasions. She has a high profile and has negotiated with Prime Ministers of all persuasions to further the cause of her people. She trained as a nurse and spent time working for what we now know as Global Interaction in India. She, along with her four siblings, is one of the stolen generations. She worked as a public servant and was appointed the first chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Commission. I have also seen her tears when at a Baptist Congress opening ceremony where some indigenous women were performing, some Afro-American women loudly proclaimed the performance was disgusting, you see, the women were performing in national dress (and topless). The pain she felt for her people was so evident, the rage in me was harder to control.

Finally, I want to introduce you to Miriam Rose and some of her wisdom. Miriam is a Catholic woman from Daly Waters. She speaks about deep listening, dadirri, but I want you to hear her explain it.

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We have much to learn about reconciliation which is at the core of our faith, we have much to learn about how we might be the body of Christ, where all members are given dignity.

Let's listen to Miriam Rose

DADIRRI (Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tow2tR\\_ezL8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tow2tR_ezL8)