

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday
4 July 2010

After the Apology: What now?

'Where now?' we might ask, more than a year after the Prime Minister's Apology to the Stolen Generations. Can we still remember what he said on behalf of the nation at that time? Do we still have that feeling about what he said? What difference has the Apology made in our lives since then?

For Christian people, a true and sincere apology can never be taken lightly. It indicates a change of heart, a recognition that something needs to be different. We are saying that we want to turn around. We want to make a commitment to a new future. Apologies are always more than words. They involve the heart, courage and being prepared to take a risk. The fruit of an apology is seen in a new attitude, in new behaviour and the desire to walk on a new path. It is about wanting to live in a new relationship with God and one another.

To help us think more the Prime Minister's Apology and what each of us has done since then, we offer the following piece of art to help us reflect on the occasion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday this year. The painting is by George Lee Tjungurrayi who lives in the Wirrimanu community in the Kimberley of Western Australia. George's father was taken away as a young boy. He was removed from his family in central Australia. He was taken a long way north to live in a very different environment, with other Aboriginal people, at Garden Point on Melville Island. Later, as a young adult, he was able to return home to his family and people but he could not speak their language. He had missed those important years growing up as a young man listening to the old people, learning their songs and receiving their love. His father was one of the Stolen Generations.

Now, decades later, George is an adult. He feels strongly and sad about what happened to his father but wants to support reconciliation and make a better future for the young people in his family and community. In this painting he describes the life of young Aboriginal men and women today and how many of them struggle with the daily choices that confront them. He says: 'Young people are caught everyday in making good and healthy decisions. They are trying to balance two cultures, two ways of thinking and behaving. They can find it hard and sometimes they give up. They feel being pulled two ways, and sometimes the pressure to change come too fast as they try to balance Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture'.



George Lee's Painting

In this painting George has shown some key tensions that can exist today in the lives of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. They can feel being pulled between their own cultural values and those of the dominant Australian society. They can find it hard to balance these pressures and tensions. He identifies five tensions: culture, family, oneself, country and spirit.

Each tension reminds us about the history of this land and why the Prime Minister's Apology was needed if healing of past hurts was to begin. The Apology touched the hearts of many Australians because it spoke an important truth about our past and acknowledged that a better future is also up to each one of us. The past is not something to be found in a history book. It is discovered in people's lives and for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people there remains a painful history they continue to remember and carry within them. This painting can help us remember what some continue to live with today. It can also invite us to think about the Apology and what we have done since that time. It can offer some ideas and suggestions to take the Apology one step further.

'We honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history ...'

Culture:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can feel that many Australians do not respect their culture.

- *Do I know the name of the Traditional people of the land where I live?*
- *Have I tried to learn something about them? Do I know the original names of places, mountains and rivers where I live?*
- *When we have important meetings or occasions do I acknowledge them?*

'We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families ...'

Family:

Many Australians do not know much about the Stolen Generations and how children were removed from their families.

- *Have I listened to any of the stories of the Stolen Generations where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people describe what happened to them, their parents and grandparents?*
- *What do these stories tell me about the importance of family, Church and being Australian?*
- *In what ways can I pay respect to this sad part of our Australian story?*

‘For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry ...’

Oneself:

Western culture places great emphasis on people learning to take individual responsibility for their lives whereas Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture places great importance on family and extended relationships.

- *What do I know about the ancient history of my own land?*
- *When did I last read or listen to or go to see something that could help me celebrate the ancient history and culture of my own country?*
- *What responsibility have I taken for furthering reconciliation in this country and caring for this land I love?*

‘We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from ... their country ...’

Country:

Most Australians live in cities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can be found in all of our major cities and in rural and remote communities.

- *Who is my favourite Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander musician, artist, dancer or story-teller?*
- *What do they sing, paint, dance or talk about?*
- *How can I share and enjoy more their music, art, theatre and stories?*

‘We the Parliament of Australia respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation ...’

Spirit:

Spirituality is at the heart of being Christian. It is the strength and grace of reconciliation. It is also at the heart of being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

- *Where is the Spirit of healing and reconciliation to be found in my local Church, school, family or workplace?*
- *When I use the word 'sorry' what does the Church and the Gospel teach me that it means? How does that understanding enrich the Prime Minister's Apology?*
- *How can I make 'sorry' more than a word?*

George's painting reveals areas of tension for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as they seek to balance the various forces in their lives. They want to find balance between what their culture tells them is important and what Australian society also tells them. Sometimes for them, and sometimes for those who want to walk with them across the bridge of reconciliation, the journey is not always easy.

The painting also reveals energy. Flowing into and out of each of the tensions is life and the possibility of finding new life, even within the tension. It is a reminder that when the Prime Minister apologised he released an energy that enables all Australians to listen to the tensions, the pain and the hurt that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to carry. For us as Christians, the Holy Spirit encourages us to listen. It reminds us that apologies are opportunities of grace. It gives us the courage to respond.

'We today take this first step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians ... a future where all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners, with equal opportunities and with an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this great country, Australia.'

As Christians we belong to a religious tradition that allows us to listen, to share in an apology and allow its healing and grace to make us better people and a nation. This challenge is up to us as individuals, but also up to us as families, communities, at home, school and in our work. As Pope Paul invited us in 2006: let us become the Church Jesus calls us to be.