

EASTER 7C: SUNDAY AFTER ASCENSION 29052022 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Acts 16:16-34; Ps 97; Revelation 22:12-21; John 17:20-26

'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 'Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'

Today begins the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity; and Reconciliation Week began on Friday 27th May to the 3rd of June. Thursday was Ascension Day, and we remembered when our Lord Jesus left his disciples and his earthly life concluded. I was pleased to be able to celebrate Ascension Day at Amana Living's Lady McCusker home that morning.

In today's gospel reading we heard another section of Jesus' farewell to the disciples, in which he spoke of oneness and unity; that his followers would be one and would love one another just as Jesus had loved them- and continues to love us all.

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles tells the story of Paul and Silas, arrested for exorcising a slave-girl. They were still in Philippi, a Roman colony, where they had met Lydia. The Roman magistrates came down hard on them, giving an early indication of Roman opposition to the new Christian movement. Paul and Silas were given a severe flogging and thrown into prison, where their feet were bound in the stocks. They would have been badly injured and very uncomfortable- but they prayed and sang hymns through the night! I think I'd be groaning and crying and begging to be let out, not singing hymns.

They were miraculously released along with all the other prisoners, which caused the prison superintendent no end of worry. He was going to kill himself- presumably before his employers could do it for him- but Paul stopped him, told him about Jesus- and he and all his household were baptised and became Christians. No wonder we remember Saint Paul as a hero of the faith.

In this episode we see both opposition from Roman authorities and welcoming acceptance to the Gospel from the Roman jailer. Paul's practice was to first speak to Jewish communities and then to Gentiles- like Romans- offering the Good News to everyone he encountered.

Given that the Christian church has its roots first in Judaism, then spreading out to all kinds of different countries with differing religions and traditions, perhaps it isn't surprising that Christians have always had trouble getting along with one another. That's why we need a week of prayer for Christian unity- because people argue and fall out over just about anything.

We need unity in Australia; within the Anglican Church as well as between the many Christian denominations that exist. We also need unity with each other as Australians.

As a country that was colonised, that has an ever-increasing diversity of people who have come from very part of the world, we need to learn how to celebrate and rejoice in our diversity. And we need to acknowledge our history as it has impacted upon the original inhabitants of this land.

Australia has welcomed thousands upon thousands of people every year, from all parts of the world. Yet in recent years a succession of governments have refused to welcome those who most need to find a safe home: refugees and asylum seekers.

I hope you have already heard the good news that the Murugappan family- Nades, Priya, and their little girls Kopika and Tharnicaa- have been given bridging visas, so they can go home to Biloela after spending four years in detention.

Priya said, "I cannot believe it. My prayer is that this government will make a change to the lives of every single refugee who comes here. "All refugees are survivors. They need hope. I had the support of Nades and we had the support of the people of Bilo. But many others don't have that support. So I want to help." This is an answer to prayer, but until the family is given permanent residency they are not safe. Can Australia be the welcoming, generous country we'd like to think it is? I hope so.

National Reconciliation Week commemorates two important achievements towards Reconciliation in Australia: the 1967 referendum which resulted in the inclusion of Aboriginal people in the census, and the Mabo decision on Native Title. The week started out as a week of Prayer for Reconciliation in 1993, which was the International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples.

This was supported by many faiths, including our own Anglican Church, acknowledging our reliance on God for true reconciliation amid such great suffering within our country.

This year's theme, 'In This Together' celebrates our common humanity across the diversity of our cultures and lives, affirming that our differences can create community rather than adversity. As Anglican Christians we understand very well that unity is created through diversity, and we are encouraged to find ways to celebrate and promote this unity through acts of reconciliation this week.

Sorry Day was on Thursday, and acknowledges that everyone in Australia, aboriginal and non-aboriginal, are in a relationship together.

We all share this wonderful land, created as God's good earth, and we all share in a common life together as neighbours and friends. In any relationship there are hurts and fractures; damage that is done we wish was never done. As part of healing, we apologise to the offended party and say 'Sorry'.

Sorry Day recognises the time that we as a nation did this, as a way of moving forward in building a better, more loving relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Australians. Following the *Bringing Them Home* report, the first Sorry Day was held on 26 May 1998, to commemorate the anniversary of the report and remember the grief, suffering and injustice experienced by the stolen generations.

This year we can remember that apology and acknowledge that the pain and damage that led to it still exists. We can still say, 'Sorry'.

Here is a prayer for Sorry Day, written by the Aboriginal and Islander Commission of the National Council of Churches in Australia.

Almighty and loving God,

you who created ALL people in your image,

Lead us to seek your compassion as we listen to the stories of our past. You gave your only Son, Jesus, who died and rose again so that sins will be forgiven.

We place before you the pain and anguish of dispossession of land, language, lore, culture, and family kinship that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have experienced.

We live in faith that all people will rise from the depths of despair and hopelessness. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have endured the pain and loss of loved ones, through the separation of children from their families.

We are sorry and ask God's forgiveness.

Touch the hearts of the broken, homeless, and inflicted and heal their spirits. In your mercy and compassion walk with us as we continue our journey of healing to create a future that is just and equitable.

Lord, you are our hope. Amen.