

## Why do we acknowledge Country and why do we do it at the start of a service or a meeting?

In Mathew 5:23-24 Jesus says: *So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*

The implication is that we cannot rightly worship God without reconciliation first taking place. It is not our anger towards another that is highlighted here, that is dealt with in the preceding verses, but the other's anger toward us. The implication is that at the very least, we may have caused that anger and more clearly, whatever the cause, if someone is angry with us, it is our responsibility to seek reconciliation. Jesus' teaching is that we cannot be right with God if we are not right with each other. We cannot worship God with an openness of heart, or with sincerity, if we have not taken this step.

I have heard many people say they do not feel the need to acknowledge Country because they, themselves, did not cause the hurt. They did not take the land or dismiss the culture, or the people, writing down their value, questioning their humanity. They did not take children away. There is another view which says that apart from any benefit received from all of this, even were it only a past event, the very act of denying the hurt (which somehow seems too small a word) makes it very current. The denial repeats, and repeats and repeats and repeats the hurt – it repeats and reinforces the damage that has been done.

We cannot seek to be reconciled to every single person that has been hurt but we can together make what is a general confession. Even if we don't quite understand it, we can acknowledge that we know that a great hurt has been inflicted, and continues to be felt, and that First People have every right to be angry with us. We can say that whatever the cause, this anger stands as a block between us and consequently it stands as a block between us and God.

There is one of those famous Greek words that is pertinent here: *metanoia*. Metanoia is sometimes translated as repentance, but repentance is not a full enough translation. Am I repentant in the sense of: "Am I sorry?" "Yes, of course, I am sorry, but metanoia asks more of us than this. It asks for a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of direction, a change of behaviour. It calls for the setting of a new course. It calls for a new way of acting in the world and towards one another. With Christ as the compass pointing us toward God, our true north, metanoia moves us from passive assent to lived action.

The Philosopher, Martin Burber, a Jew writing after the atrocities of World War II, spoke about the relationships between people as sacred in the same way that our relationship with God is sacred. Burber called it an I-thou relationship - one that is mutual and respectful - one in which people are present to one another, open to one another, truly seeing one another. The opposite of this, he said, was an I-it relationship in which people hold themselves apart, keeping others as "different," as people to whom we are not tied in sacred relationship. In this way, he said, others become objects and not human in the same way that we are. They become less than us.

Who were the people who were the focus of Jesus' ministry? Read for yourselves, but as I see it, Jesus' focus was the people that the religious of his day saw as "less -less than human." What did Jesus do? Again, look for yourselves, but as I see it, Jesus met other people with their humanity in clear view. Jesus sought to restore people to a sense of themselves and their worth – so that they knew that they are loved of God. The work of Jesus is not stuck in the past but is on-going.

Again, we cannot be reconciled with every single person that has been hurt by the loss of a sense of self or culture, or by the removal of children, or the denial of basic humanity, but we can turn, we can stand before God and bring as our offering, our gift for the altar, a renewed understanding of what has happened and is happening and our part in its continuance. We can acknowledge together that a people and a culture has value, that its elders have wisdom and are worthy of respect and that we are a people who see this acknowledgement as necessary to our unimpeded relationship with God.

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