

Strehlow and Atonement

Sermon at Leura Uniting Church, 23 October 2022

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Good morning. I acknowledge indigenous elders and all indigenous people, and the suffering and sorrow and silencing they continue to experience. I thank the reverend Mel MacArthur for his kind invitation to participate in today's service to commemorate the legacy of Carl Strehlow on the centenary of his death. My comments will focus on the theology of atonement and repentance.

Atonement is an ethical and moral concept that means being at one. It describes a situation of reconciliation, where a damaged relationship is healed. In Christianity, the death of Christ on the cross is held to atone for the sins of the world, repairing our broken connection to God and bringing humanity into unity with the earth and the cosmos.

Our walk down the Larapinta River in July provided time to reflect together on how badly modern Australian history has harmed the cultural and natural life in this beautiful fragile place. The ancient living systems of the Larapinta have a complex and priceless sanctity that we should hold as of infinite value. Instead the Australian nation has held this heritage as of little worth.

We should reflect on how Christian faith can enter the ethical conversations about the need to atone for the destruction of our irreplaceable cultural and natural heritage.

How can the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on Golgotha relate to the broken relationships of Central Australia? We are far from the integral peace of atonement. In atonement we are all at one with the whole of creation. Jesus tells us in The Last Judgement that we will remain in a state of disruption and division until we transform our social values to give the highest esteem to all who are excluded and marginalised and damaged by the evils of the world. We must treat the defenceless and vulnerable and innocent as though they are Jesus Christ himself.

As we mark the centenary of the death of Carl Strehlow at Horseshoe Bend, we can ask about his vision of atonement. The courageous work of both the Reverend Carl Strehlow and his son Ted to document and honour the ancient living culture of the Arrernte people of Ntaria is part of an atoning journey of healing for Australia.

But atonement faces a major blockage. Unrepentant racism continues to blight the lives of Arrernte people today. The journey toward atonement for the destruction of indigenous culture and ecology has barely begun, and will be the work of many centuries.

The Larapinta is the oldest river on Earth, flowing through the same stable geology for the last half billion years. The old river was formed before plants emerged from the sea. Ever since then, its ecosystems have evolved into ever more complex interrelationships, punctuated by occasional catastrophes including at present. We should hold natural and cultural complexity as sacred, as a window upon eternity, as a revelation of how God supports the orderly flourishing of life on Earth.

Australia's white settler society has a heedless and unrepentant arrogance about our destruction of Australia's ancient natural and cultural complexity. This refusal to repent is a main barrier to the respectful dialogue needed for atonement. In this context, it is valuable to consider what the Bible had to say about repentance. John the Baptist tells us in the story of the baptism of Christ that repentance is essential to obtain forgiveness. When you have done wrong, you have to be sorry in your heart in order to restore right relationships. You must understand that you have done wrong, why it is wrong, and the harm your action has caused. That means that while a society remains in denial of its state of sin, which is largely the case for Australia's history of genocide and ecocide, that society also remains unforgiven by God. Our mental and physical health requires a path to atonement.

The love of God is infinite and unconditional, but the Gospel tells us that divine forgiveness is conditional upon repentance. To restore our relationship with God requires an atoning sorrow, a recognition how actions that benefitted us came at great cost and loss for others.

And such restoration is essential, for otherwise we worsen the division and delusion and suffering of our society, living under what the Bible calls a state of divine wrath.

Jesus tells us in the Beatitudes 'blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.' We can hope for the comfort of atonement as we mourn the violence of Australia's frontier wars. Grief over historic loss generates a need to understand its ongoing effects and to encourage broader social repentance for the sins of our society, leading to reconciliation, recognition and respect.

The Indigenous Voice to Parliament will deepen religious conversations about Australia's need to atone for the evil deeds of the colonial period and the enduring traumatic legacy of the violence of conquest.

Yesterday the Uniting Church held its first indigenous theology conference. I put a question to the distinguished indigenous theologian Aunty Anne Pattel-Grey about her views on repentance and atonement. Aunty Anne responded that white Australians need to walk alongside indigenous people as equals. This means our situation can still be redeemed, but only if we challenge and transform dominant social values that promote division and injustice and inequality.

The ancient natural beauty of the Larapinta River is a sign of the abundant loving grace of God. Our pilgrimage of reconciliation along the Larapinta showed how fragile and sensitive its ecology and human culture are today.

We have a religious duty to atone for the sins of our society in order to repair the damage we have caused. As Christ prayed, may we all be one. Just as Christ bore the sins of the world, the church today has an atoning mission of healing and restoration. Only a rigorous and resolute honesty about our true situation can open the path toward atonement.

Let us pray. Loving eternal God, we give thanks for your incarnation in Jesus Christ, who suffered and died under the Roman Empire as indigenous Australians have suffered and died under the British Empire. We pray for the Larapinta River, for its people, climate and biology. We pray for the day when our world will be at one with you, through the glorious grace of your Son Jesus Christ, whose death on the cross began the atoning work that we are called to continue today. In the name of Christ, Amen