

**Address by Nyunggai Warren Mundine AO
at the Festival Evensong for St James', Apostle and Martyr,
in Commemoration of Australia's First Peoples and the Eora Nation**

on 29 July 2018 at St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

I'm honoured to be here this afternoon at St James' for its commemoration of the Eora Nation. I'd like to thank The Reverend Andrew Sempell for inviting me to give this address.

This area of Sydney cove is the traditional lands of the Gadigal people. The Gadigal clan are one of at least 29 clan groups from the Greater Sydney area. They spoke the Dharug language which was spoken over a large area around Sydney including up to the Hawkesbury River, inland to Mt Victoria and south to Camden.

St James' church is one of Sydney's iconic historical sites, designed by convict and architect Francis Greenway and built nearly 200 years ago in the 1820s. When this church was being designed and built my Irish ancestors were experiencing great hardship in County Cork with a huge economic downturn. By 1832, the City of Cork was in the grip of a cholera outbreak with the Great Famine approaching. It was much the same all over Ireland. Millions of Irish fled their homeland creating the great Irish diaspora. My great-great-grandfather was one of them and he found his way to Australia. He settled with an Aboriginal woman from the Yuin people of the south coast of New South Wales.

It was through these Irish origins that Catholicism was introduced to my branch of the Mundine family. My father, Roy Mundine, converted to Catholicism when he married my mother, Dolly Donovan.

For Catholics, "reconciliation" is one of the seven sacraments of the Church. It's also known as "confession" although admission of wrong is only one part of it. The most important part is absolution from sin. Young people going through the sacrament today learn that reconciliation has two essential elements – being sorry and receiving forgiveness.

Most religions embrace a reconciliation concept in one form or another. Some use language like atonement or grace. In non-religious contexts, we have peace processes, restorative justice and amnesty. Post-apartheid South Africa had the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that publicly acknowledged past wrongs and granted amnesty from prosecution for many of those who confessed wrongdoing. Through these processes it's hoped people can move on in peace despite a past that cannot be undone.

The common theme is that reconciliation involves both the wrongdoer and the wronged taking steps towards each other to restore or establish a relationship after a conflict.

The reconciliation process in Australia has been in place for around 25 years. But I sometimes feel there is no end to that process in sight. When exactly is it that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia will actually become reconciled?

I believe the reason for this is that discussions about Indigenous reconciliation focus almost entirely on the sorry part but little, if at all, on the forgiveness part.

As a nation, Australia and its citizens have taken major steps of remorse and amends, both symbolic and practical. The 1967 Referendum and the National Apology were major steps by the Federal Government and, importantly, were overwhelmingly supported by the Australian people.

Today every government and most major companies have a Reconciliation Action Plan. Governments and the private sector are devoting substantial funds and resources to overcome the ongoing consequences of past wrongdoing and close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians in health, employment, education and economic participation.

Racism against Aboriginal people used to be a mainstream attitude reinforced in all the important institutions – media, government, schools and universities, business and the legal system, for example. Today it's the opposite.

Without question, the status of Aboriginal people in Australian society has totally changed since I was born. As have the opportunities for young Aboriginal people.

But for true reconciliation, it's not enough that the country says sorry, feels remorse, rejects racism and seeks to make amends. It wouldn't even be enough to close the gap. For real reconciliation, Aboriginal people also need to forgive. That doesn't mean forgiving wrongdoers as individuals – almost all are now dead and cannot feel remorse. But the time must come when Aboriginal people forgive Australia as a nation.

Aboriginal people have every reason to be aggrieved and angry about the past. And we must never forget the past. But it's a permanent, irreversible part of Australian history. So Aboriginal people now have two options: continue to feel anger at Australia for something it cannot change or leave these events in the past, draw a line in history and allow Australia to start with a clean slate.

Continuing to feel anger can manifest itself in a number of ways.

For example, always assuming the worst of Australian authorities, or talking about atrocities of the past as a way of shaming or criticising Australia today, or pouncing on a single word and amplifying it to something it's not, or equating patriotism with racism.

Drawing a line in history means Aboriginal people permitting themselves to love their country, express patriotism, take pride in Australia's successes and achievements, and feel part of Australia as a nation, in addition to their own first nations. To be honest I think most Aboriginal people out there already largely feel this way. But they are the ones who aren't so noisy, and you don't hear from very much.

Last year I published my memoirs. I have a revised edition coming out in a few weeks. It's an autobiography but more than that it's a book about Australia told through the perspective of my family, starting from the first contact my Bundjalung ancestors had with the white settlers who came up the Clarence River looking for grazing land.

Not long after the first settlers – brothers Edward and Frederick Ogilvie - arrived at the upper Clarence, there was a massacre of Bundjalung people carried primarily in retaliation for the killing of a station owner further up river. The Ogilvies took a leading role in the attack. It was typical of the exchanges in the early frontier conflicts across the continent – one white colonist killed, many Aboriginal people killed in retaliation.

In 1842, Edward Ogilvie wrote a 2000-word letter to the Sydney Herald detailing his early encounters with the local Aboriginal people of the Clarence River region, the early conflicts and his negotiations with them. I found the letter when researching my book and it provided a unique window into the relations between the Ogilvies and my forebears.

Among other things he describes his negotiation with the local Bundjalung people over use of the land. His account shows his pragmatism and a desire to avoid conflict. It also shows the pragmatism of my forebears. Here was a group of people playing the cards they were dealt and trying to manage the problems that had come their way.

They reached an agreement. This was a form of reconciliation – a settlement after a conflict. Not a perfect reconciliation of course - my ancestors obviously had a lot less bargaining power than the settlers. But for its time it was remarkable.

The settlers set up their station and my ancestors lived and worked there, maintaining a good relationship with the station owners to this day. As I talk about in my book, this one act of reconciliation changed the trajectory of my ancestors, most importantly by giving them their own land and ongoing economic participation.

I've spoken a lot about the importance of treaties in the Aboriginal reconciliation process. I talk about the details and mechanics of this proposal in my book. But essentially, each traditional owner group would have an opportunity to enter into a treaty where they get formal recognition as the traditional owners of their traditional land and have any native title claim concluded. And each traditional owner group who signs onto a treaty would formally recognise Australia and its right to exist. By signing a treaty, they draw a line in history and allow Australia to move on from a clean slate.

Real reconciliation isn't easy. It's not wishy-washy, feel-good stuff. It's making peace after a conflict. It's not what you do with someone you have a cosy, friendly relationship with. It's something you do with someone you have greatly wronged or who you consider has done you a great wrong, or both.

* * *

I am very proud to be an Australian. And I'm proud of Australia.

I'm proud that the first nations of the Australian continent are the oldest continuing nations and cultures in the world. Australia's ancient history goes back to before written recorded history. And because Aboriginal people lived for so long isolated from the rest of the world, that ancient history provides a unique window into the ancient ways of all humankind. Aboriginal people didn't have written language. Our ancestors preserved their history through the oral tradition. Telling stories – usually in song – which were memorised and passed down to from each generation to the next. Those stories that have been preserved today actually tell the history of this continent over millennia. This is Australia's ancient history and something all Australians should know about, celebrate and be proud of.

Australia itself is one of the youngest nations in the world, formed on 1 January 1901. So, the Australian continent hosts one of the youngest nations of the world and also the oldest nations of the world. And that makes Australia unique.

In 1901, Australia was still incomplete because not all Australians had the full entitlements of citizens. This changed on 27 May 1967, when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were brought under the Australian Constitution. When this happened, Aboriginal people celebrated. I'm proud of that moment, proud the Australian people overwhelmingly supported that change, voting in greater numbers than in any other vote in Australia's history.

Australia was founded on the great principles of Western civilisation – like representative democracy, the free market, the rule of law, the separation of religion and the state, social pluralism, and individualism. Also, on great British institutions – like Westminster government, the common law system and liberal rights. If you were setting up a new nation and wanted to adopt the best, you couldn't do much better than those principles and institutions.

The Judeo-Christian tradition was a critical building block to the principles of Western civilisation. Many of the great ideas that underpin the great principles of Western civilisation come from the Judeo-Christian narrative. This tradition is itself ancient, going back over 4000 years and one that also originally relied on the oral tradition. The stories in the Bible are the records of stories that had been told, in some cases for millennia, before being written down.

It's not widely talked about, but most Aboriginal people are Christian. In fact, the Indigenous groups that are the most culturally traditional are amongst the most devout Christians. Every year there is a major celebration and ceremony in the Torres Strait Islands called the Coming of the Light and it celebrates the adoption of Christianity in the islands.

I'm proud of Australia's record as a migrant nation. Migrants have come to Australia from all corners of the world, settled peacefully and contributed positively. My great-great grandfather from Ireland was one of them.

Some of Australia's earliest migrants were from China, joining the gold rushes in the 1800s. Afghanis also came in the 1800s as cameleers working in outback transportation. Most of those Chinese and Afghanis were single men, and many went on to have families with Aboriginal women. In the 1900s, Australia continued to receive migrants from all over the world, enriching our society.

I lived in the middle of this in Auburn in the 1960s - where many new migrants first settled. As a child in primary school I was in a class with about 30 kids and about just as many ethnic backgrounds.

Some people will hear me say I am proud of Australia and wince. Some people wonder how an Aboriginal man could be proud of Australia when he, his family and his ancestors were treated so badly in the history of Australia and the British colonies before it.

And to them I say this. No nation in the world has been founded on purity. Even those nations that are the standard bearers of liberty and justice, the great models of progressive and enlightened systems, have bloody and brutal histories. History is full of people behaving badly and heroically, sometimes at the same time; history isn't a work of fiction with goodies and baddies. It just is.

History is messy and brutal, with few pure heroes or villains. The richness and beauty of history is in its complexities and moral ambiguities. The people of Australia's history – its first peoples, invaders, colonisers, settlers and migrants – aren't heroes and villains in a story, but real people who displayed a range of successes, failings, weaknesses and virtues.

History is fascinating and enticing, not because it's pure but because it's not. Human history is a record ... of humans: the brutality of which humans are capable and also the incredible capacity of humans to advance, to learn from wrongdoing, build better societies and to improve the quality of all life.

People aren't defined by what happened to them or their ancestors in the past. I've seen people all over the world who've built strong nations and societies despite the brutality of history.

I don't judge a nation by the worst of its history but by how it overcomes the worst of its history and by its vision for the future. And on that measure, I judge Australia well.

All Australians can embrace and be proud of this continent's shared more than 40,000-year history. A history that includes the ancient past of our first nations, the great principles of Western civilisation and the Judeo-Christian tradition on which modern Australia has been founded and the cultural richness from two centuries of immigration.

One of the characteristics of Australia's culture is tolerance of difference and getting on with people you may not have a lot in common with – who you may not even particularly like - and somehow making it work. When you live on a continent as large, harsh and isolated as Australia you can't really survive any other way.

Our Australian identity and culture has been critically shaped by our land and sea. We are unique in the world. And we are a model to the rest of the world as to how humans can live together in peace.