

Australia Day (2021)

- The Beatitudes we just heard are at the beginning of the 'Sermon on the Mount' & it presents a picture of a society where the usual expectations of how people relate to each other are overturned.
- Jesus wants to create a new society where the old rules of engagement are superseded, especially in relation to enmity & violence.
- In fact, in the Sermon on the Mount all forms of resolving disputes, starting with families (spouses, brothers) are turned upside down.
- And we are a 'Land Down Under' - Australia is a place to which people have been attracted over the millennia to forge a new future.
- First, the original inhabitants coming down through Asia, & then the settlers, migrants & refugees of the last 233 years. (Of course, the convicts weren't a voluntary part of the movement of peoples here!)
- Most were attracted by a vision of a different future, a future where human beings could relate to each other differently to the old order in Europe, & more recently in the Middle East or Africa or Asia or Central or South America.
- People were & are prepared to take the risk of being dis-located, of re-locating because of that vision of a different future, particularly a future not determined by the violence of feud & warfare which had characterised their homelands for generations, centuries, & even millennia.
- They come because they aspire to be someone different, to do something different, in ways not predetermined by centuries of custom & tradition in their home society.
- Is this movement of people to Australia a 'chance event'?
- Is it just another phase of world history? I don't believe so.
- I recall walking down a corridor in the Vatican Museums, the wall of which was painted with a map of the world; where Australia is, there was just ocean blue.
- It was painted before European explorers began to map our coastline!
- Later mapping expeditions gave us our name: 'Australia'?
- De Quiros, the great Portuguese explorer of the 16th Century, set out on a quest for '*Terra Australis del Espiritu Santo*', South Land of the Holy Spirit.
- From the start, the full title of our land was bound up with the Holy Spirit.
- I am confident that 'Australia' is a work of the Holy Spirit, not a chance event in world history but a gathering of peoples for a Divine purpose.
- One of the most distinctive works of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was the breaking down of ethnic, tribal & language barriers between people.
- That is why Christianity spread like wild fire across the Roman Empire.
- Australia is a place where that Pentecostal impulse is felt very strongly.
- People from every nation, tribe, ethnic, & religious group on the face of the earth have relocated here & are creating a new sort of society.
- Human beings can relate to each other free from past structures of oppression & division in their old homeland societies.

- They have come, in their millions, to escape the histories of societies where everyone 'knew their place', to a land where we relate to each other for our inherent worth.
- Hence the great Australian characteristic of 'egalitarianism'.
- Have we responded to the Holy Spirit perfectly? Certainly not!
- Our treatment of the earliest inhabitants of this land was shameful, & is not yet fully remedied as Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount desires.
- There's been a lot of discussion in recent months about the date & the way we celebrate Australia Day.
- For the Aboriginal people 26th January is "Invasion Day"; for European Australians it is the beginning of a new venture in a new land.
- We naively thought that planting the Union Jack on Sydney's shores made the land "our own."; in 1992 the Mabo decision revoked the concept of Terra Nullius; in 1988 at the Bicentenary celebrations, Burnum Burnum, an Aboriginal elder planted an Aboriginal flag in English soil to show the naivety of planting a flag & calling a land "our own"; so, we still search for identity & the deep meaning of being Australian in 2021.
- Rather than reducing Australia Day to "a European perspective" or an "Aboriginal perspective", a way through the tension may be found by expressing sorrow for our past mistakes & brutalities as part of the day while picking up on the prophetic figures like Eddie Mabo, like the High Court & some politicians who dared to see the bigger picture, & so celebrating the hopeful & creative ways we can move forward as a nation as well.
- Our treatment of those genuinely fleeing persecution in their homelands also falls short of what Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount desires.
- The challenge for us as Christians, is to create a version of the Kingdom of God under the Southern Cross of which we can be proud.
- So as we thank God today & reflect on our being so blessed, we are realistic about the challenges of being a great nation.
- May I conclude with a few words from the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd spoken in 2008 on the occasion of the apology about a new future:
- *"For the future we take heart; resolving that this new page in the history of our great continent can now be written. We today take this first step by acknowledging the past & laying claim to a future that embraces **all** Australians. A future where we harness the determination of all Australians, Indigenous & non-Indigenous, to close the gap that lies between us in life expectancy, educational achievement & economic opportunity. A future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed. A future based on mutual respect, mutual resolve & mutual responsibility. A future where **all** Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners, with equal opportunities & with an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this great country, Australia".*