

## Launch of Kerker

“Christ in Culture” Conference, Noosaville Qld

Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> July 2007

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I begin by acknowledging that I am a visitor in this place and I have not met the local people. I am grateful to be a guest in their country.

Secondly I want to acknowledge my partnership with you on the Gospel, and my commitment with you to our common faith in Jesus, and the community of faith gathered by the Holy Spirit.

It is good to be here with you. Thank you, Graeme & NATSIEC, for arranging this event, and the publication of Kerker – ‘Time Now’. What you as a group is doing is important, even more so in times like this of immense challenge. I hope you continue, despite the difficulties and lack of understanding with which some might greet your work. I know there have been major set backs in the past. Western models of theology have been so dominant for so long that many people have forgotten that Jesus did not come from the West, nor was he European, but, as Ray Minniecon rightly points out in his essay, Jesus was from the East, a member of the local indigenous people in his land of birth. So much of the Bible is indeed a tribal story – of community identity, of opportunity and risk, of oppression and the oppressed, of want and plenty, of land and dispute, of the ways of one people coming into contact, for good or for ill, with the ways of another. In the pages of the Book, most of which was first a collection of oral stories, we meet these people as they identified and learned to love the God who was among them.

Some people use this concept to discredit the Bible. They think that somehow story equals untruth. It started when we were kids. If Mum or Dad thought we were lying, they would say, “Don’t give me that story” – meaning, don’t tell me fibs! In my early ministry, when I once spoke about the Bible as story, an upset

parishioner chastised me. "Don't call it a story," he said, "because you're saying it's not true."

Somehow Western theology, and along with it, Western culture, became detached from the story, not only of the Bible, but of life itself. As the investigation of the natural world took over, and with it a sense of dominance or control, so scientists and society began to imagine we were more than human and had somehow reached a higher state. To be held within a human story was somehow too limiting. They wanted freedom. Suddenly everything existed to serve that freedom of the self, to treat the story of life as though it were inconsequential, and there was no longer any harmony, and the stories of God, the world, and its people, were left to the superstitious masses.

You experienced the dislocation of this outcome of the Western enlightenment. It's the only way the fiction of 'Terra Nullius' could have been invented. It's why these essays ask the question, "Did God come off the boat in 1770?" This volume says an emphatic "no". Now you are working to recover the story of faith in Indigenous culture, at the same time as valuing the good things that did come off all the boats that have arrived since 1770. We all have this responsibility. Just as the Bible story is intertwined, so your story and my story are intertwined. God is in that intertwining of our stories, and we must walk together to discover what God means by letting our stories mix. Perhaps we will find a new story to tell, a new reality to unpack. It has always been my belief, and my dream, that here in Australia we can do something really special, something new, something to give hope to the world as we learn to live together well in this place.

Perhaps theology itself is part of the issue. Semantically theology is made up of two words: God, and Word. It is literally words about God, or God talk. Graeme Mundine makes the point in the introduction to the book that, "the essays ... do not emerge from high academic discourse." He is quite right – and the best theology never does. The world of the academy is a construct, the world of life and story is a given. Academy, while useful, is not superior to life. At its best theology is away of being – its thought, language, and practice must

incorporate our being, and explore our relationship with God. Who we are is totally relevant to theology because it can never be done in the abstract. Our identity gives us our sense of perspective, and helps us understand our starting point. In the academy there is sometimes a theory, possibly derived from philosophy, that we can arrive at some sort of pure thought about God. This book, Kerker, will have none of that, embedded as it is in the life and experience of Indigenous people in the real world in Australia today.

Today we are all becoming more aware of our origins, and how those origins skew our perspectives. This is being brought to light by the current emphasis on Christian / Muslim relations. I would say that you, however, knew this long ago. You have seen Western theology promote its positions as absolute and as a result become blinded to the wealth and wisdom of others. This theology you are doing is risk taking. It is a new path. It is struggle. It can land you in conflict with religious authorities. It can be discredited among your own people. It is an act of courage.

The grace and fortitude of the Indigenous people of Australia is legend. Your patience has been sorely tried. Through work such as you are doing here, and publications like this little book, 'Kerker', things are moving in the right direction. We are grateful to Mick Connelly, Valma Connelly, Wally Fejo, Joan Hendriks, Saibo Mabo, Ray Minniecon, Graeme Mundine, Elizabeth Pike, Ray Welsh and the team from NATSIEC for contributing and putting this work together. I hope that the Churches listen. This is a contribution, a step, to our growing together in Christ, and our living together well as Australians, Indigenous and others. Through it we reaffirm this country as a really special place, and of those who live here as fellow travellers in life, and the story of faith.

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*11/07/07*