

Honouring Our Lost – Cassius Turvey

**Rev. Canon Glenn Loughrey, Wiradjuri,
Chair, National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders Anglican Council
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There is a myth deeply held in the heart of Australians – that racism was and is not part of our history. Egalitarianism is our essential belief about ourselves. All are welcomed and included and the legend that underwrites our sense of self is found buried on the sands of Gallipoli – one gives up his/her life for another – in what is deemed the foundational myth of our country - we are one and we are free.

The Gallipoli myth, as we now understand it, is disconnected from what was the foundational ideology professed by all political parties at the time of Federation. Our country was instituted as the last example of the white supremacy project present in the world and the politicians of all stripes agreed. The white Australia policy was a cross-partisan policy, unquestionable and enforceable.¹

The white Australia policy lasted until 1973, and while the law has changed it has taken some time for the multi-culturalism we now celebrate to become embedded as a fixture in our country. Yet the racism that underpinned the previous policy remains in a variety of guises, as many from immigrant populations will attest. Undeniably we are now from many lands, and at least have an acceptance of difference in this space.

While we may celebrate this progress, the First People of this land remain outcasts on their own countries, suffering vilification and violence based solely on the contrived category of race. Coloniality is built on the modernist concept of race and colour. It allowed the powerful and the rich (white western Europeans) to undevelop peoples across the world of their lives, cultures,

economies, and spirituality. In doing so they committed genocide to control the power and wealth available in the countries they invaded.

Australia is no different. William Cox, who built the road over the Blue Mountains, it is alleged, said, "The only way is to exterminate this vermin – women and children included." In the journals and letters of the times, this sentiment was rampant as colonial power spread out to steal the land to feed the growing economic development in the "Old Country".

Henry Reynolds and others have laid out the ideological framework which spread the violence based solely on race and built the infrastructure we benefit from in this present Australia. Bruce Pascoe, Daniel Kahneman and others point to the sophisticated and efficient country here before invasion, before another fabrication became the means to whitewash us of our sovereignty and our land.

Statistics of the subsequent destitution of a formerly healthy, peaceful, and generous people speak of the role race takes in this process. Race defines who is competent or not and who has the power to decide, who is or is not a human being and who has the power to decide and who is and is not seen and heard and who has the power to decide. We could spend much time unpacking this but not today, yet it needs to be recognized that in all our institutions without exception there is only one who decides and that one is not the First peoples.

In the last fortnight we have seen the destructive nature of race as a concept and ideology. Cassius Turvey, a 15-year-old Noongar boy was walking home from school with his friends when he was attacked with an iron bar by someone who accused the boys, wrongly, of damaging his car the day before. He went to hospital and was sent home before suffering from the impact of the beating and placed in a coma. He died a few days later.

The response of the WA police commissioner was to suggest that this was not racially motivated. It is good to see he has since met with the community and apologized. The leader of the Opposition said that Aboriginal children are more

at risk in their own homes. While in Queensland, a senior policeman is accused of racism and bullying when engaged in a conversation with Elders. The only one to seemingly see what this was about was the Prime Minister who named it for what it was – a racially motivated attack.

Cassius and friends were attacked on the premise that the ones who damaged the car were Aboriginal. It was an attack of pre-meditation and viciousness, it could be argued, that was birthed in the racial hate that remains embedded in our society.

In the same week Noel Pearson, in the Boyer lectures, noted that Australians don't like Aboriginals. My personal experience agrees with Noel. People like our culture (the oldest living culture in the world) but do not like the contemporary people whose ancestors created it and who continue to create culture for white society. People visit the art gallery and then, after discussing my art, look at me and say things like: "I don't believe a thing you say", "you don't have the right to call yourself Aboriginal" and more.

Racism has ended the futures of many of our young people. The honour roll of those who have died by violence or committed suicide because of it is long and embarrassing. Or at least it should be embarrassing. Unfortunately, these incidents fail to create more than a ripple on the surface of existence. In this recent instance I have not seen or heard a senior church leader of any denomination or church speak out. I know some clergy will be attending one of today's vigils for Cassius but there has been no condemnation of the event, of racism or of the comments made by those who should know better.

That is not good enough.

Cassius's death is a tragedy. A young man who had much to give died because of the colour of his skin. With some 30 years of Reconciliation and its accompanying Reconciliation Action Plan's, improvements in how our stories are told in schools, movies, books, and song, it would be expected that we would find ourselves in a different place. We don't. Instead, we find ourselves

mourning the loss of another one of our young people and those who should care appear not to.

Colour and race are powerful and destructive. Cassius's death and the authorities' responses remind us that if you scratch this supposedly sophisticated country you find the uncomfortable truth.

Australia does not like Aboriginal people.

As Chair of the National Aboriginal Council of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Council, I call upon the church to:

- condemn the racism responsible for Cassius' death and the response of those in power.
- work to ensure that the Statement of the Heart is fully implemented in Australian society and that the Voice embedded in the constitution becomes a reality.
- institute a policy of non-tolerance to racism in all its forms, individual and institutional (The Cassius Turvey Rule) within all Diocesan, parish, and institutional frameworks.
- face the truth about its history and participation in the racism that built this nation, working to be an instrument of restorative justice in the image and pattern of Christ.

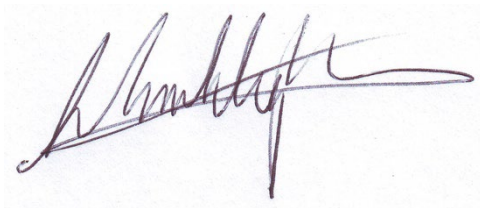
As Chair of NATSIAC:

- I do unequivocally condemn the racism that is rampant and resulted in this tragedy occurring.
- I condemn the party politics responsible for failing to work as one and respect our people's sovereignty on land that was stolen not ceded.
- I condemn those that use race to pursue their own ends and remain committed to maintaining our people as deficit people.
- I call upon my own Diocese of Melbourne to address the institutional and personal racism present in its systems and practices and upon the Anglican Church of Australia in all its various emanations to do likewise.

- I commit NATSIAC to work tirelessly to address these issues both in the church and society through whatever means we have available to us.

I will finish with the words from Jesus as related by John:

Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father^{} does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomsoever he wishes. The Father judges no one but has given all judgement to the Son, so that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. Anyone who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him. Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life. John 5:19-24*

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'R. Smith', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.