

Bunjil & the Order of Melchizedek

MUC Fellowship@10, 25 January 2025

(Aboriginal Sunday / Day of Mourning)

Alison Sampson, reflecting on Genesis 14:17-24

& selected readings from Hebrews

I acknowledge that my thinking was shaped by insights from tralwooway man, Rev Dr Garry Worete Deverell, and from Bidjara/Kari Kari woman, Professor Anne Patel-Gray.

On 26 January 1788, the First Fleet landed in Sydney Cove. There, Captain Arthur Phillip raised the Union Jack and claimed half the continent for his king. It marked the beginning of the disruption, dispossession and colonisation of over 300 nations, and a devastating loss of life. Fifty years later, on this same date in 1838, over 200 Gamilaroi people were massacred at Waterloo Creek.

The modern nation we call Australia did not yet exist. It only came into being in 1900, and even then celebrations of nationhood took nearly a century to be cemented into the national calendar. It wasn't until 1994 that 26 January was formally set aside for a national public holiday. But given it's a date marking colonisation and a date red with blood, many continue to recognise it as a Day of Mourning; others as Invasion Day, or Survival Day.

What, I hear you ask, does this have to do with old Abram and his wheeling and dealing in the Valley of the Kings? I'll get to that, but first I suggest that the country we now call Australia was established by those who followed in the footsteps of Joshua. As you might remember, after centuries of exile in Egypt, and after 40 years of wilderness wandering, Joshua leads Israel back into Canaan. But first he announces that the land is under a holy curse. Then he declares that all men, all women, all children and all livestock must be slaughtered, and all valuables stolen and added to the treasury. In other words, Joshua enters the land with the extreme obliterating violence and theft that we now call genocide, and he does it in God's name.

I would love to say that the establishment of our nation was very different, but I can't. Some ministers in the colony spoke of a new Canaan. Others preached on the baseness of Aboriginal people. They described them as

children of Ham and predicted their imminent destruction, and they denounced creator-ancestors as demons. With such goading, in the name of Christ great terror was unleashed and Christians willingly participated in many massacres. In Warrnambool, some were known for going to church on Sunday mornings, then shooting Peek Whurrung people on Sunday afternoons. One of my own ancestors, a Methodist, is thought to have participated in a massacre in South Australia, driving men, women and children off a cliff.

Across the continent, Christian folk used Aboriginal people as unpaid labour, a practice called slavery in other parts of the world; they tore young children away from their mothers in order to ‘civilise’ them. Language, story and ceremony were outlawed, and cultural knowledge was devastatingly disrupted. It was terror unleashed, an unholy curse, a very real attempt to erase all trace of Aboriginal people, language, history and culture, and it was done all too often by churchgoers.

To be children of Joshua: this is our inheritance and our shame. And it’s strange, because we are not called children of Joshua but children of Abraham, and Abraham’s story, while chequered, nevertheless suggests a different way. We find one example in Genesis 14, back when he was called Abram, there in the Valley of the Kings.

Abram has just returned from a series of military skirmishes. He has been working with his allies – a group of Indigenous tribes and their leaders – to retrieve his nephew Lot and others who had been abducted by a different tribal coalition. Upon his return, he was blessed by Melchizedek in the name of ‘El Elyon, maker of sky and land ...’ They shared bread and wine, and Abram gave Melchizedek one-tenth of his possessions.

Understand this: El Elyon wasn’t Abram’s god, for Abram’s god was Yahweh. Instead, El was the Canaanite creator-ancestor, and Elyon the honorific ‘Most High’. Yet Abram received blessings in El Elyon’s name, broke bread and drank wine with El Elyon’s priest, Melchizedek, and gave this priest a tithe of his possessions. He didn’t reject El Elyon or El Elyon’s priest, but respected them and showed them honour.

More, in swearing an oath in the name of ‘Yahweh, El Elyon, maker of sky and land ...’, Abram brought the two gods together in his oath, conflating their creative activity. In this oath, he made treaty to take nothing that wasn’t his: not the land, not the people, not their possessions.

We opened today's service by remembering when the earth was formless, and God's breath hovered over the deep, and God called forth creation. Then we remembered Bunjil hovering over formless matter, blowing air through his beak to create the land, scratching soil with his talons to make plants and trees. Perhaps you found this strange, even shocking. But our ancestor Abram does much more. For where we simply acknowledged the creator-ancestor of this place, Bunjil, Abram acknowledges the creator-ancestor, El, by name. But then he receives the creator-ancestor's blessing, gives a tithe to the creator-ancestor's priest, and swears by the creator-ancestor to deal fairly in the land, while acknowledging the overlap between Yahweh and the creator-ancestor.

Abram's approach points to a way of being in the land that this nation has barely tried: a way of coalition, a way of negotiation, a way of mutual blessing. A way of honour and respect, a way of acknowledging resonances between the ancestors and Abram's god, a way of living together with our difference.

At this point, you might say that this is all very well, but our primary identity is not as children of Abraham. More important, we are followers of Jesus. So what does this old story about Abram, Melchizedek and El Elyon have to do with us?

According to the letter to the Hebrews, a lot. The author describes Jesus as our great high priest. Yet according to the law of Israel, Jesus is not and never can be a priest. He isn't born into the line of Aaron, from which all Israel's priests must come. Instead, he is born into the line of Judah: the kingly line. Where, then, does Jesus derive his priestly authority?

The author writes, 'Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; as he says also in another place, "You are a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek."' (Hebrews 5:5-6). So it was God who appointed Jesus as priest, and this priesthood is in the order of Melchizedek.

Melchizedek is not Jewish. He is a Canaanite priest and king. His name means 'king of justice', and he is also king of Salem, that is, he is 'king of peace.' More, and I quote Hebrews, having 'no father, no mother, no genealogy; having neither birth nor death, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.' (Hebrews 7:1-3).

As one without beginning or end, Melchizedek was, is, and always will be; he's what First Peoples might call an ancestor. More, his authority doesn't come from Jewish religious tradition, but from his participation in the indestructible life of the creator-spirit of the land. It is this priesthood, a priesthood grounded in an Indigenous Canaanite creator-ancestor, to which Christ is appointed by God. (Your head should be exploding right about now.) And it is through the power of this priesthood that the sacrificial system has been brought to an end and faith has poured into the world. More, as members of the body made in Christ's image, this is our priesthood, too.

Several implications come to mind. First, many early settlers declared First Peoples were not religious, for they were not seen to pray, build churches or engage in other formal European religious practices. Leaving aside comments about observational failings, I note that a religious practice shaped by the order of Melchizedek permeates all things. Perhaps we might understand Indigenous religious expression through this lens. There is no need for a defined thing called prayer or for a visible church building when every activity is a spiritual act and the whole world radiates the divine.

We do this thing called prayer and we worship in churches because the reconciliation of heaven and earth has not yet been fully realised in us. But we are called to a fully integrated way of being, a way in which every aspect of life is deeply permeated by spirit and story, a way which is profoundly Indigenous. So we would do well to read, listen and learn from Indigenous pastors, poets, theologians, academics, artists, activists, songwriters and storytellers, letting them unmake and shape us until we learn to recognise and honour God in every place and time.

Second, just as Abram knew the name and activity of the Canaanite creator-ancestor El Elyon, I suggest we too should know the name and activity of the creator-ancestors where we live. More, where the church has historically sought to silence and eradicate these stories, I suggest that we are called to repent of this stance. Instead, I suggest it is our duty and our joy to seek out, listen and learn from these stories when they are entrusted to us.

Where we are gathered today, this means knowing about Bunjil the creator-ancestor and Waa the law-giver. In the central desert, it means learning the stories of Kungkarangkalpa, or the Seven Sisters, as they are pursued by Wadi Niru across the continent. In Gunditjmara country, stories of Budj Bim and the birth of lava flow and wetlands take priority. For people

called to tend and serve the earth, which according to Genesis is all of us, creation stories are crucial. They show us where we really live, what is important and how to attend to country. A church which stands in the order of Melchizedek will take these stories very seriously.

Third, I believe that acknowledgement of country and ancestors is both biblical and necessary. To acknowledge these things is not a hollow exercise in woke politics. Jesus' priestly authority arises from the order of Melchizedek, which in turn derives its authority from the creator-ancestor El Elyon. In a sign of respect and honour, El Elyon is invoked, acknowledged and given a tithe by our ancestor Abram, so paying respect to creator-ancestors has biblical precedent. More, because of the boundary-shattering grace embodied by Christ's priesthood, we will recognise and honour the source of his priestly authority: the creator-ancestor of each place.

Finally, without truth, without treaty, there is no justice or peace. Called as we are to the order of Melchizedek, king of justice, king of peace, I suggest we are therefore called to truth-telling and to a more just settlement. Given the powerful forces which benefit from how things are, both external and within ourselves, I can't pretend that we will achieve these goals in our lifetimes. Even so, I believe we must be part of the work, and that the work is happening now.

Of course, this won't make us popular. As the letter to the Hebrews reminds us, 'Jesus suffered outside the city gate ... so let us go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.' (Hebrews 13:12-14).

My friends, if perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood, there would be no need for a new covenant grounded in divine activity. If maturity could have been attained through an aggressive religious nationalism, there would be no need for a priesthood grounded in an Indigenous creator-ancestor which takes worship outside the temple. If love permeated all that we do, there would be no need for a reimagined city, that radiant community of justice and peace that is to come.

Yet perfection, maturity and love continue to elude us. So let us seek the transformation of ourselves and of our nation, working and praying in the name of our great high priest, Jesus Christ, Son of God. And as we work and pray, let us seek the way of coalition, the way of negotiation, the way of mutual blessing. Let us seek the way of honour and respect, the way of

acknowledging resonances between the ancestors and our god, the way of living together with our difference. Let us acknowledge the very real pain of colonisation and take seriously the calls to change the date, change the bail laws, change our policing and so much more. For we are called to be a people of blessing, not in the abstract, but to the land and among the people where we actually live, that we may claim our rightful inheritance: children of Abraham, children of a loving God.

Let us pray: Creator of land and sky, through your priest Melchizedek you blessed Abram, a stranger in the land. Give us the wisdom to recognise your blessings however they come, and grant us the grace to receive them. Help us to share them beyond ourselves, that we may be part of your glorious work of justice and peace. We pray in the name of our great high priest: Jesus Christ, our Lord: Amen. Ω