

## FORGIVENESS



There was an exhibition in Contemporary Art at Auckland Art Gallery from “The Black Australia” exhibition in 2014. This piece by Bindi Cole, from the Wathaurung People caught my breath. It is a large piece made from emu feathers on MDF board. In the corner of the room is a video loop of Aboriginal people looking into the camera, looking at me, (and every other observer, but designed to be an encounter with an individual) repeating, “I forgive you”. I stayed for twenty minutes and noticed that I found it difficult to pull myself out of the space; I retrospectively notice that I was completely unaware of the other people viewing and experiencing the exhibit. As I left the gallery I bought some postcards of the image and have it in front of me now. This was a significant encounter which has become incorporated into the weave of the threads of forgiveness which as a theme has so preoccupied us as Christians.

### *EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE*

This goes from the specific and personal to the cultural and universal. The image of my exploration would be the concentric circles of the pebble thrown in the pool. Forgiveness is and has been the theme of my reflections during this year and this path will continue to my death.

For what was I being forgiven? They don’t know me; how am I responsible?

I realised that I initially felt responsible as a British person whose ancestors, in the interests of empire and supremacy, or from a belief that colonisation was the goal at all costs, or from an intention that they were bringing improvement, significantly altered the history of the Aboriginal people in a profoundly unjust way. The film, Rabbit Proof Fence shocked and informed me in equal measure in a similar manner. I am reminded of a time in the first year of working here in New Zealand when I went to a meeting in Wellsford and was aware of being the focus of projected blame as the only pakeha in the room; I was extremely uncomfortable and realised that we had cultural advisors for very good reason. I attended a conference on foetal alcohol syndrome and one of the speakers said that Maori

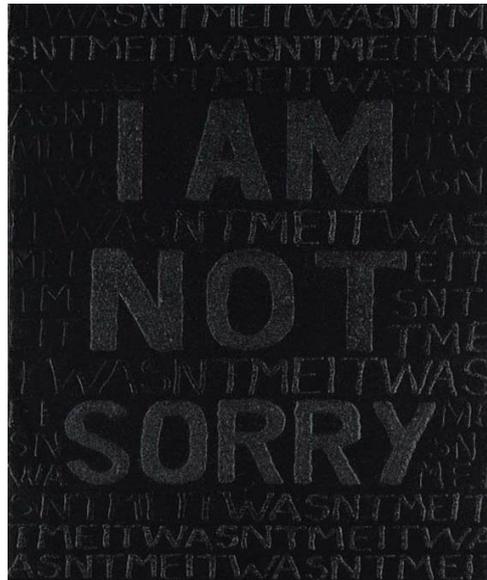
did not drink alcohol before being colonised; this may be true, but I certainly felt the impact of her resentment.

In 1778 Captain Arthur Philip arrived in Botany Bay. The land was declared *terra nullius*, the land belonged to no one and the net result was that indigenous Australians could not own land, which they has previously roamed and called theirs in their unique way. In the 1890's 'Protectors were given the capacity to remove children who were labeled 'half caste', they we placed in reformatories, some well into the 1960s. This process has been described as 'forced assimilation'. Those people who were deemed to be full blooded aborigines were confined to reservations and segregation continued also into the 60's.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1990s the Reconciliation Movement gained momentum after a groundbreaking speech by Paul Keating ( the then prime minister)

*...it might help us if we non-Aboriginal Australians imagined ourselves dispossessed of land we have lived on for 50,000 years-and then imagine ourselves told that it had never been ours...*

Artists responded, some to be denial or a Richard Bell's work *I challenge in the face of acknowledgement. Here be framed as "the sins of In 2008 after a pain, Kevin Rudd, the the indigenous people of*



in anger as a result of what appeared collective, selective 'forgetting'. *didn't do it 2002* was clearly a apparent lack of collective I see how denial can occur as it can the fathers" (it wasn't me) prolonged period of expectation and prime minister made an apology to Australia...

*We apologise for the parliaments and profound grief, suffering and loss on those our fellow Australians.....For the pain, ,suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry.*

So it is from this history that Bindi's artwork has emerged and the piece "*I forgive you* " is from an exhibition "*Seventy times Seven*".<sup>2</sup> She says of the work

*"Forgiveness is usually specific, but the statement I'm making in this work is multilayered. It's open to everyone.....It covers everything while targeting nothing."*<sup>3</sup>

## DIGGING DEEPER

<sup>1</sup> A Sacred Country ,Pamphlet from the exhibition.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 18:21-22

<sup>3</sup> Queensland Art Gallery,*My Country. I Still Call Australia Home/Contemporary Art from Black Australia* (Queensland,QAG,2013)

The situation in Australia is something I knew little about until I came to live in New Zealand. The impact of colonialism and colonisation is tangible in the very fabric of the culture. I feel better informed as a result of reading around the specifics of the history which seems to come alive when partnered with the art. Standing in the centre of this exhibit I experienced healing. *It is open to everyone...It covers everything while targeting nothing..* It was a liturgy of forgiveness, a very personal worship. God was present, I experienced forgiveness and so my journey continues, going deeper, feeling the levels of forgiveness within myself.

Michale Leunig speaks into to this issue in his "A Common Prayer"

*There are only two feelings.Love and fear.  
There are only two languages .Love and fear.  
There are only two activities .Love and fear.  
There are only two motives,two procedures,  
Two frameworks,two results.Love and fear.  
Love and fear.<sup>4</sup>*

The core values here are about justice, wrongs being acknowledged and the capacity to say "I am sorry" from a place of integrity and truth. What stops us? What stops us saying sorry? I think Michael Leunig is right-fear; fear of loss of face, fear of being alone , fear of anger, fear of pain, fear of retribution, fear of rejection, fear of being wrong, fear of being found out.

How do we journey through process of forgiveness ?I read the Road to Emmaus( Luke 24:13-35).I then took us through the Emmaus prayer from the book *Don't Forgive Too Soon.* <sup>5</sup>

#### *MAKING FAITH CONNECTIONS*

*"Through the cross of Christ,  
God have mercy on you,  
Pardon you  
And set you free.  
Know that you are forgiven  
and be at peace.  
God strengthen you in all goodness  
and keep you in life eternal."<sup>6</sup>*

And so to the liturgy of forgiveness; as we are all forgiven there is a oneness in and through Christ. Thinking about the art work and its context, it is helpful to me to be reminded of the fact that this process of forgiveness within worship is going on globally and has gone on for centuries makes me think that this too can be a time of forgiveness for our ancestors, which would be a very comfortable

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<sup>4</sup> A Common Prayer ,Michael Leunig.

<sup>5</sup> Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, Matthew Linn. *Don't Forgive Too Soon.*

<sup>6</sup> A New Zealand Prayer Book,479

concept in this country. We stand as Christians in and of the world and hold the generations before God.

I believe I struggle like Peter.

*Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times? Jesus said to him, "not seven times, I tell you, seventy –seven times."7*

This gives me comfort that God is with the strugglers who need to persist in what sometimes feels a glacial process. For me the idea of forgiving seventy seven times fits in with the concept that forgiveness takes the persistence of a granite sculptor.

Desomond Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation Commission encountered those who sought forgiveness and received it, those who sought forgiveness and didn't receive it, those who did not seek forgiveness and received it and those who did not seek forgiveness and did not receive it (and probably many shades in between). There was not always reconciliation but perhaps what there was was a search for or statement of truth, individual truths which were spoken and heard; the word *ubuntu* invokes a generosity of spirit that seeks reconciliation of the South African nation. In similar vein Michael Lapsley who has established the Institute for the Healing of Memories talks about people bearing witness to their truth.<sup>8</sup> He says

*Now I am a healer and I work to free people from being prisoners of the past, to free them from being prisoners of a moment in time and to allow them to become agents of history once again-to allow them to be free to create and shape their world.*

Sheila Pritchard, my spiritual advisor helped me explore forgiveness further by sharing with me the importance of "no demand" when we forgive; no demand for continued friendship, no demand for conditions, no demand for anything from the other. She used the image of a ball and chain, this process of letting go then releases the person who forgives from carrying it around any longer.

#### **LEARNING**

I have learnt that the threads of hard questions are worth exploring even if they are at the growing edge of my spiritual understanding. I was deeply moved by the work of art and believe that God is helping me see threads of this theme wherever I go. I find sitting with art a deeply spiritual and emotional process. The term 'sitting with' is really central to much of what I do. At a cognitive level I am learning always never to assume that I know what is going on and the position of naïve enquirer is always the safest and most humble. I do not know the experience of instant forgiveness and will continue to count to seventy seven and keep the key to the ball and chain ready!

Kay Brightley

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 18:21-22

<sup>8</sup> Michael Lapsley *Redeeming the Past* ( New York:Orbis Books,2012)

