



NATSIEC

VOLUME: 1 ISSUE: 2

THEOLOGY NEWS

APRIL 2004—A NATSIEC PUBLICATION

THE THEOLOGY
PROJECT OF THE
NATSIEC

“Aboriginal Spirituality: My Journey – Our Journey”

A Talk by Rev. Sealin Garlett Bardon Centre, Brisbane December 2004.

This is an ongoing project of NATSIEC which is to promote discussion about Indigenous spirituality and theology. We must remember that just as there are many denominations in Australia, there are many different ways that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders express their relationship to God, the land and other people. Indigenous theology continues to grow. NATSIEC hopes that this section will be a resource helping people to come to a deeper understanding of Indigenous spirituality and for the first peoples of this land to share their faith.

Like many of my brothers, thousands of my brothers and sisters I too became a part of the stolen generation. As a young boy being taken away from my community. As a young boy being taken away from my mum and dad and the close knit relatives of our Aboriginal people of that particular time. And I always had a question in my heart as a young man of who I belonged to. I always had a question about my land, my language and my stories. Before I was taken on the mission I went through an Aboriginal ceremony and I was seated down as an old man explained what had taken place. And then when we went to the mission. As a young guy it was normal for us to go and live two weeks in the bush away from my home. My mum and dad moved into a house with electricity and running water in 1970. And at the mission when we began to be acquainted with the grief of our fellow brothers and sisters it was in the early 70's that they looked at a young Aboriginal boy and said this guy's got potential. So they sent me to a foster home. Being in a foster home I found it hard to adjust because it was in mixed society. And I always new spiritually that I belonged somewhere. In the back of my mind and in my heart I knew I belonged. A cottage mother when I was a young boy had given me a bible. A 'Good News for Modern Man'. And she said "young man read this, it might do you good one day". And I remember grabbing that book and reading it from the book of Matthew to the book of revelation in under two months. And I just read that book, just read it under two months. And

when I had finished, I believed in my being that I had achieved something. I believed that according to the white culture that I was being a part of then and there that I had achieved something. This book to them was something so special and I read it. And as a young man who didn't know a lot about reading and writing I read this bible from Matthew to Revelation and it had an impact upon my life.



When I ran away in 1974 (still under the care of the native welfare but I ran away) and as a young guy full of valour and the other stuff young people have at that particular age I took on shearing. I used to be a shearer as a young boy. The native welfare got in touch with the police and said to allow this young man he can stay in his community but allow him to report to you once a week. I met a girl in my country town and we were married. In 1979 I made a commitment to Jesus Christ. In 1979 I made

a commitment to him. My wife and I had three children but I made a commitment to God on one condition, on the condition that I would bring the agenda of what I wanted to do as a Christian. And I said to God because why I was made this commitment was that as young man I was carrying a chip on my shoulder; as a young man I was carrying a grudge. I had all the valour - I could do anything that anybody in the community could do. But when I came and met God face to face, there was a challenge within me that I wanted God to take with me. And I made that commitment on a September evening in 1979 under the leadership of Rev. Ron Williams. And when I came to the front and they prayed for me, I said to God, "I'll be a Christian but I'll be a Christian to my Aboriginal people". And I was happy with that.

There were a number of churches in our country town but we formed an Aboriginal group. And in my leadership I became the acting pastor of the church and for a number of years God blessed me. Then early in '82, '83 a little fella from north Qld came to my little country town. His name was Uncle Charles Harris. He came and said "look why don't you come to my mob, he said why don't you come to the murris up there". And

here was an Aboriginal guy who had never left his noongar territory, here was an Aboriginal guy who had never been on an aeroplane, on a boat. I had never chucked a line in the water. I was like my brother here. We were Kangaroo fellas. And he said "brother come over to Queensland". And I asked a question because I brought God an agenda. And I said "brother what is the population that I'd be going to", and when he said the majority would be Aboriginal people, I went away and I said we'd pray about it. And we got permission off our old people and then I went to Mornington to share in the ministry there.

But in my heart I had an agenda for God. You know God allowed me to carry that for 12 years. At Mornington I candidated through the Calvary Presbytery then moved to Western Australia under Peel presbytery and I candidated as a Minister of the Word. I wanted to be a leader, spiritual leader for my people. I wanted to learn the Bible, I want to learn not only the geography and, the dynamics of God, which unfortunately I haven't attained as yet. But I wanted it for my Aboriginal people. I was very passionate about that. So in my training and just before I got ordained, I was sitting in the theological hall on reflection on a Wednesday afternoon in September again (and this was in 1988) and a little voice said to me, it said 'Sealin you've got to cross the line'. Now there were 15 students with me in my training in that particular year and this little voice said 'Sealin you've got to

cross the line'. And I thought it was one of these guys playing jokes with me and looked around. No they were in their own world. And then I began to reflect, I began to reflect what had happened. And this little voice said "Sealin you've got to cross the line", and I knew exactly where that line was, and I knew exactly what that voice was talking about. In my own silent way in my own reflection at that particular time, I said to this voice, "I'll cross the line". Now there wasn't any slaps on the back or bells or lightning or loud clanging sounds, it was just a serenity of knowing within that you made a decision.



On that particular day in 1988 I crossed the line. Going on to 15 years as an ordained minister and my crossing the line. I remember when I was inducted into a white parish. As a part of my induction and a week later the elder said "look we need some children done, but we've got to see the family". There was a gentleman who died in my parish and the undertaker rang up and said "so and so has passed away, he's in your parish. I do believe you are the parish minister". And after our conversation he said to me, he said "your voice sounds Aboriginal" and I said "Well I think it is. It's been there for a number

of years that I know of". And he said "I'll get back to you". And he did. And I did the service and the two things that came out of those two events was why did the people ask if an Aboriginal baptises my children? Why is it ok that people ask if it is ok if an Aboriginal can do the service for my deceased? And here I was in my attitude that I had to God. "Well come on God - I crossed the line. Come on god I really meant what I said. Come on you're not playing your part".

And then I began to ask as a minister within the church, and the question troubled me for a number of years... Am I an Aboriginal Christian or a Christian Aboriginal? It was great being ordained, being a figure in my community. I was asked in my first year as a minister, would I be an exchange minister to Vancouver in Canada. I said "Well I have to prove something to my people first before I can go across those waters". And I wanted to prove that.

There was one particular day in my time away from the parish when I went back to an Aboriginal ceremony back home, I went back to this man's cave. And I parked my motor car a fair way down the road and I walked back to this man's cave. And in my new Christian faith and in the journey that I was absorbed and embraced by the God and faith of Jesus Christ, I wanted to go back to this man's cave just to have a look. So I walked up the hill and I went inside this cave. And I sat down and had a look at my story. I was looking at all the

stories in that cave. And when I looked down next to me, my little girl was sitting there. I looked at her and I looked the stories and I looked and her and I think 'she's not allowed to be here'. So I grabbed her hand and I walked away and I think 'no it's cool, it'll be ok, I'm a Christian now. It'll be alright'. But as we went away and a week later my little girl got sick and when I say little girl, this girl was about 10 or 11 and at that age, like most little girls know, they follow their dad everywhere. And this little girl got sick. She would take fits. We took her to the doctors, had head scans and prayed for her. And going on 11, 12 years of age, as a parent you begin to worry. And this little girl wasn't getting better. Then I said to God 'you know I don't know'. And 5am one morning a magpie sang out and he sang out in my language and he said "... " and I listen and I think this bird is speaking funny way. And he said "... " and in my language that means "hey brother you should take that child home". And I'm thinking 'well why do I need to take her home?' And I remembered that in Aboriginal way, in our way that if we go back to our country we've got a tongue that we speak in to let them know who our people were. And I fought, you know I

This Little Voice said, "Sealin you've got to cross the line."

really fought against it. "I'm a Christian, I don't need to take her back there. I don't need to take her back to that cave and stay outside". Because what would usually happen is that we have a bush, a smoke bush that we call a *girr*, and that smoke bush we would 'Language...' and we would it put underneath our arm and wipe it on her face and then we would say in language who this child was and let her know her language. In English, they don't know Sealin Garlett's daughter, they

cave and he talked language again'. When you're a Christian you leave all that alone, you know. So I was ready for the backlash to take place. But it didn't happen, it didn't happen. And that little girl has never been sick ever since.

I began on my journey of being able to look at the journey of our God and our Indigenous people. There are many things that I learnt as a young boy and a young man as I came away from the



wouldn't know that. But when I mention the skin name, when I mention the traditional name, they know the link. Well I had nothing to lose. As a dad you're at wits end. So we got in the car went back to the cave, I found the bush and me and my little girl, we walked up again. And I got this bush and I did it nailburranging, I wiped it underneath my arm and wiped it on her face and I put it under my arm and wiped it on her face again. And I said in language "[in language]". I said "this child belongs to this family. This is the skin name". "in language]" I said "I was shamed that I brought this little girl here. I was shamed that this little girl had come to this place". Well I chucked the bush away. And I said to her come on, we'll go. And I felt relieved. Relieved that I did that. A little bit hesitant of what people might think. A little bit hesitant of what my Aboriginal community is going to say about it 'hey that fella went over to that

mission. I wanted to get back to my roots. There was an anger of being able to, for me as an individual, being able to point my finger at the church and say you shouldn't have done that. And yet all along, God is saying that I'm part of that journey. And as I began to reflect on who I am, as I began to reflect on the nearness of God amongst our people, there have been many times that I've laid back and had dreams in language of getting to know the young people. And I remember at one corroboree in Mornington I said to an old fella, "How do you mob get those songs", and he said "You know they come in dreams", he said "the old people come to us, sing them to us". And this happened to me one night, and they said "where are the children, where are the young people?" And it said in our language [in language]. It said "where are the children?" It said that the police had broken their

spirits. And I thought about this and not long after somebody said do you know the statistics of the Indigenous population of Australia? Well I said I know a little bit about it. They said, well did you know that 50% of the indigenous population of Australia are 25 years and under? And all along my faith journey if there was one thing I wanted to give to our young people, it's a sense of who they are, is a hope that they have as a people. When I was ordained the young people were saying "look, my mum and dad were part of the stolen generation. You know we've got to pay these white people back for what they did to them. You know my grandparents were that. And these young fellas would steal motor cars and smash in the shops and everything and part of my role was to go into the prisons and calm them down and begin to have a conversation with them. In all of this, they really wanted to know who they are. Of who they are. A young man said to me "brother I don't need to know Christianity", he said "look brother I'm going back to the dreaming, when I go back to my spiritual roots and the dreaming that has kept our people here for years and years and years. And I never deterred him. I said brother "you go for it, because you'll find God at the base and the core of that being. You will find God in those stories". And here was I as an Indigenous man, a man of the cloth, a man who had known the missionary ways. And here was I beginning to reach out and to find out who I am. In my journey as a leader, in my journey as an Aboriginal amongst my people has been one to acknowledge the presence of God. The great values

of our land are not really going to come out of books and out of the academic ability that some people have, but it's going to come out of here. Out of who you are. I think that when we begin to touch the pulse beat of who we are, to acknowledge our presence and the journey and the satisfaction that we know we have in this place then we'll know of our role of where we are. I crossed the line God, I crossed the line. And in crossing the line, that brought about a whole new world and crossing the line has been able to have a look at the picture that I really wanted to see. And I always, I never questioned my Aboriginality. But I was an obedient boy. If they told me not to speak my language or to tell my

"The great values of our land are not really going to come out of books and out of the academic ability that some people have, but it's going to come out of here. Out of who you are. I think that when we begin to touch the pulse beat of who we are.."

stories I didn't. If they said don't go and find bush food I didn't. You can take the boy out of the bush. But you can't take the bush out of the boy. And it's been a tremendous journey. I've been able to stand along side of great men. I've been able to walk this journey with great men and women and to see the impact that God has had on our lives. It's been able to identify my journey as a Christian and my journey as an Aboriginal. And I've been privileged to share with the

NATSIEC

6/379 Kent St
Locked Bag 199 Sydney 1230
Phone: +61 2 9299 2215
Fax: +61 2 9262 4514
Email: natsiec@ncca.org.au

Indigenous people of Canada. And for them people have been part of the residential schools and seeing them step upon a firm foundation. And I think amidst all the processes of education, and I think education is great. I honestly do. I think education is the pathway that our people are going to find the leadership our country needs. But along with that education you need a parallel. You need to take with you who you are if you leave one behind then you'll never be as rich as you're meant to be because when we begin to hold that high, when we begin to grasp onto that because who we are stamps the authority that the presence of our God had upon this land.

And it's been a great journey. It's been a journey I've been able to be humble before God. It's one that I've been able to keep the things that you know within and yet you feel a sense of such a relief when you just know it's time to release it. It's been a great journey. My role in the mission, as I said I came with an agenda. And I was absolutely sure that God this is what I wanted to do. And let me say God for 12 years God allowed me to do that. For 12 years he allowed me to carry that burden. But it was His time. And I believe that all my Indigenous people, you've got to follow your heart. Because there's a link of the creator of heaven and earth that's been the pulse beat of this land, that's been a part of the journey of our Indigenous people. By right my mother tongue should

have been gone. This language now should have been wiped out. But it's been kept for a reason. It's been able to show the connectiveness. It's been able to show the reality of the presence of God in our land. And the many of my Indigenous people who know that and the spirituality and realm of where they are, who really know the presence of God in the here and now. And we need to take that journey on. We need to have a passion of what we want to do. And I was just so thrilled amidst our meeting and a sense of bubbling within me the need to release our young people to stand on the stage of leadership. To release our young people to do that. To hold your heads high up, who you are. Because there's a spirituality, there's a uniqueness of the presence of God that can actually saturate the inner being of your life. And there's no barrier. There's no mountain that you couldn't climb, there's no river that you couldn't cross. Bigger than that connection. It's the reason that we're here today. We're really proud that we're here today. And we're proud in God. And we take that pride and the presence and the uniqueness and God's been able to keep us where we are.

My journey of theology. I had a lot of questions. There's a lot of things that I wanted to do and I wanted to hide but it's been a journey that I've kept close to God. And I was passionate about who I am. What I wanted to become but I wanted to do it in God's time. And I want to say to you friends tonight that if we take that agenda and if we allow God to be a part of that, then you'll not only see the uniqueness of that relationship but let me say you'll know the reality of coming to the forefront of your life, your family and

most of all our nation.

I could have gone away a bitter man. I could have carried that burden and said "God I don't want to be a part, I don't want to play the role you want me to" but when I read that Bible one of the things I vowed, one of the things that I promised is that my children would never walk this pathway, and it was in part that commitment that in a sense God allowed me to journey that. And as I look back on my journey and I never see the footprints and to be able to humbly say that you can behold the newness of God in life. And God in his way has allowed the fruits to grow. It's through our commitment and our yieldment to his way and to his will. And he released that. A lot of the things I wanted to hide, God released it. And I'll say the famous last words of a minister or a pastor... In closing, I would like to close with this story...

In 1989 an old Aboriginal man took me on the hills of King's Park in Perth, WA. And this old gentleman was 89 years of age. And on King's Park they have a horse and sulky that you can pay so much and he'll take you for a ride around King's Park. And this old man he said to me "Come-on we'll go for a ride. So me and this old fellow I helped him up with his walking stick and put his glasses on and we sat back and he told me the dream-time story of that place. He told me the camps, the fruit trees, the medicine bushes. He told me the special places. The ceremony grounds that people used to acknowledge and be a part of. And we sat back and we looked out over the Swan River and he said "you know this is

God's place first. He said if you ever talk in aboriginal language, if you ever talk in your tongue, you say this is God's place first. He would say "[in language]" - that God the father who lives in heaven gave the aboriginal people of this country this land. And he said to "[in language]" - to hold their hearts and to always remember. And he said if you lose sight of that, you begin to lose sight of who you are. The presence of our God, and it's not being churchy, it's about who we belong to who, who we are and who we were made for. And I'm proud to say tonight that I'm an Aboriginal Christian. Thank you.

To advance dialogue in this Theology area, the Commission has agreed on the following aims for it's project:

- To educate themselves in this area. This will entail inviting speakers into their meetings to give presentations on some currant thinking in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Contextual Theology
- To educate the wider community on Indigenous spirituality in a series of talks entitled, 'The light of Australia'.
- Produce resources.
- His is an attempt to share this information with the wider community.

Any comments about this publication or the project can be directed to natsiec@ncca.org.au