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“Indigenous Spirituality and the Church: A Cultural Faith”

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Darlington Centre, University of Sydney, 8th July 2003

In many ways we are all alike. In other ways we are different. We are different because we come from different backgrounds. Although we are one in Christ, we come from different cultures.

In our discussion today, I want to use the image of culture as a basket. Each culture carries its own traditional basket. In the islands of the Torres Strait, our baskets were used to collect our daily food. These baskets are a very important part of our traditional life for they contain food that nourishes our life. For all of us, baskets represent not only food for our daily lives, but they also symbolise our culture. For example, the European basket represents European food, material goods and spiritual things. In the same way, the dilly bag of Aboriginal culture contains Aboriginal food, material goods and spiritual aspects. In the Torres Strait Islands, the basket is called a Li, in the Western Islands and in the Eastern Islands it is called an Epei.

The History of the Christian story stories that the gospel of Jesus Christ was brought to Indigenous people in the European basket. That is, the Anglo-Celtic basket. It contained not only the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth, but also the Bible that contains different versions and interpretations of European forms of Christianity. This means that before the Gospel was brought to our Indigenous context, it was already contextualised in Europe.

The gospel was brought to Indigenous people at a time in history when Christianity was strongly identified with European culture or civilisation. This meant that to accept the Gospel, was to also accept European culture and European forms of Christianity. Our people saw no difference between the Gospel and European culture or between the Gospel and European forms of Christianity.

Thus, the European basket was handed down to Indigenous people. We accepted this basket without question and we have appreciated the spiritual nourishment



contained in the basket. In this European basket, we have not only found Gospel, but also Liturgies and forms of worship which were developed in the Anglo-Celtic contexts, through which the faith in Jesus of Nazareth and his Good News is expressed.

As time has passed and we have grown in our Christian faith, we have begun a process whereby we are taking the seeds of Christianity out of the Anglo-Celtic basket and we are now planting them in the Indigenous cultural soil and living our Christian lives in the Indigenous context. We are weaving a new basket- an indigenous basket, to carry the Gospel to our own people. We are mindful of the need to develop our own Liturgy and Worship through which to express our faith in Jesus of Nazareth.

For our Islander and aboriginal Church to be strong, we have to learn how to let God speak through our culture. But, first, we must understand our own culture. This will help us understand the deepest truths about the Bible, as we interpret and relate to our Indigenous contexts. In this way, we are taking the good things, the uniqueness of our own culture, and our vision of God and we are placing them in the new Indigenous basket.

How is it that we can do this? How is it that God allows us to do this? For us, God's message is the same. But, it is presented in different ways because of our different backgrounds.

Imagine you are on one of the islands of the Torres Strait. There are coconut trees everywhere. Some trees have green coconuts, some yellow coconuts and others, brown coconuts. These coconuts may have different colours but coconut meat and milk all tastes the same. Likewise, God's message has been presented in different ways through the Old Testament, through the Prophets, apostles and Teachers, in a variety of ways and contexts. But, it is the same God and the same Kingdom that is proclaimed throughout the generations and in different cultures.

Jesus is God's Good News for all cultures. The Gospel tells us that God became human beings like us. John 1:14 says "The Word (Logos) became flesh and



tabernacled among us and we beheld his glory.” The Logos, the mysterious creative Word and the Power of God, pitched his tent or tabernacle and ‘camped’ among us. He took on human form, common to all of us, whether we are black or white, yellow or red. Jesus showed us God’s glory. This is the mysterious, powerful and awesome presence of God, which was experienced by God’s people in Old Testament times. This God is the Creator God.

The Creator God was also present in our indigenous contexts. Indigenous peoples experienced his mysterious and awesome presence in different ways in their sacred places, ceremonies and stories.

On my traditional homeland of Mer Island (Murray Island) in the Torres Strait, this mysterious power and presence was experienced through the ancestor “god” of Malo. Creative powers were expressed through this “god”. Malo is a symbol of the mysterious power and presence of Creator God revealed in the Bible. He was also present in pre-Christian, Indigenous cultures.

Our Mer Island spirituality is linked with the coming of Malo. As I tell you the story of Malo, listen and think what connections it has with the stories of Jesus in the bible. What parts of the story are you reminded of?

Malo and three of his brothers came from the direction of PNG, from a place called Tyogere. The three brothers were named Segar, Kulka and Sieu. They rowed their canoes from Toogere to the Torres Strait Islands, but they decided to go separate and go to different islands. Malo decided to go to Mer Island.

A woman fishing on the shore witnessed and experienced the coming of Malo. We can say that Malo used this woman to make himself known to the people. This woman’s name was Kabour.

Kabour looked towards the horizon and she saw a lugger boat sailing towards her. But, when she looked again, instead of the lugger, she saw a meido, a variety of palm growing on the riverbanks of PNG. It was floating towards her, then somehow it changed into a gugur pod, a variety of bamboo and continued to float towards her. But then something happened!



She looked down and saw an octopus, stretching its eight tentacles towards her. Kabour grabbed a spear and speared the octopus. She put the octopus. She put the octopus in her basket and took it home with her. Later that night, Kabour told her husband, Dog, the mysterious things that she saw and experienced before she speared the octopus.

Later that night, while they were looking at the basket, they saw a light appearing from the octopus' eyes. Then they saw a man jump out of the basket and with the light from his eyes showing the way, the man walked out from the house. He walked all over Mer Island. When the man returned at about 3 or 4 in the morning, Kabour and Dog were still awake and they watched as he jumped back in the basket and the light in the man's eyes went out.

A few days later, Kabour's cousins- two brothers – came to visit them because they had heard that something special and mysterious was in the house. The two cousins stayed up late and saw the same thing that had happened previously. They decided to steal the basket and take it to where other tribes lived. The light and movement of the man, Malo, made them aware that he was a special kind of man. As they travelled to the place of other tribes, they danced and worshipped Malo. The place where they worshipped him was called "Las."

To our ancestors, Malo was clearly a supernatural being. He came to Mer Island in the form of something which was familiar to our people – the octopus. This is the island context. The eight tentacles of the octopus represent the eight tribes of Mer Island. Malo strengthens the Mer Island tribes by giving laws and bringing social order. Malo established respect for living things. Malo was not needlessly destructive, so he walked on tiptoe to avoid treading on any plants.

Since my childhood, I have been taught to respect my traditional ways. I was taught that Malo never stretched his hands to steal what belongs to other people, he keeps his feet way from trespassing on other people's land. The spiritual foundation laid down by Malo has helped my people to live together and these laws have helped our culture to survive.



Malo was the supreme being that my people worshipped before the Coming of the Light of the Gospel in 1871. The Gospel pointed us to the Father and Creator revealed to us in Jesus. We believe that God used Malo to establish Mer Island spirituality. Malo is the bridge to our understanding of God revealed to us in Christ.

That is the story of Malo.

Another story which is important to us as Indigenous people is the story of the two waterholes on Mer Island. One of these waterholes was on top of a hill and the other was down in the valley. Our traditional spirituality is also centred on this story. It is our traditional story that is parallel with the Christian teachings about the way in which we can drink from the pureness of God and bathe in the clear waters of his spirit.

The waterhole in the valley was very large and was made in sandstone – a sandy stones waterhole. It was dirty and filthy because there were many dry leaves and dead frogs floating in the water. People swam there and washed their clothes in the waterhole and drank from its waters. They loved to go there, but the dirty water gave the girls sores in their mouths and eyes. The girls became weak and sick and there was death in their community. This was probably the reason why they did not follow the old woman, Deo, to the top of the hill.

You see, Deo knew about another waterhole- one at the top of the hill. This waterhole was in solid sandstone. The rock kept it clean. Deo protected the waterhole by cleaning out the leaves and other dead things that floated in it. The waterhole was small but it was clear as crystal and the water tasted beautiful. It was pure. The water from this waterhole kept the old woman free from sickness and disease. She lived like a young woman.

In our world today, we have two waterholes. The waterhole at the bottom of the hill is modern life and entertainment. Some people are so greedy for money, new cars, new houses and boats. But what is the result of using this waterhole? What are the results that give negative growth to people today? The results are: countries fighting each other- wars; relationships and people cut down, growing weak, hating



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each other. There is no time to live in the presence of the almighty God Yaweh because people are drinking from the sandy stones waterhole – the dirty waterhole – the filthy waters of life.

The other waterhole that comes from the solid rock is God. The people who drink from this waterhole are the ones who are faithful. They have committed their life and became humble and obedient to do God's will. Also, they are people who always listen and obey and show others how to leave the filthy waters of life. They are the people who are healthy and strong and alive in the church of God.

The water that they drink comes from the waterhole at the top of the hill. It is clean and pure and has a beautiful taste. This water is the holy Spirit that washes the sins of the world and it strengthens people's lives so that their faith can stand strong and fight against the world of flesh and the devil. The living stream only flows from the church of God where it dwells. Jesus is the crystal water that flows from the top of the hill where we drink and quench our thirst. Only Jesus washes away our sins.

The wonders and mysteries that are expressed in our stories and in our traditions are those same mysteries and stories that are expressed in Anglo-Celtic Christianity. The mystery of God has been made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. Our spirituality refers to this mystery in the story of Malo. Malo is our traditional creator, yet we know that the Creator of all – the Creator Spirit, the God of Creation, is revealed in Christ to be the Reconciling Spirit and the God of Redemption and Liberation. This is the God that was brought to us in the Anglo-Celtic basket. And now we need to take this Gospel and put it in our Indigenous basket and allow the Gospel seed to grow in our soils.

Djiniyini Gondarra, the Arnhem Land theologian says, "We Aboriginal leaders are called to plant Christ in this Aboriginal Australian 'fertile soil' rather than transplant western forms of Christianity. We must promote Christ as a living and acceptable part of our ceremony and culture. Our confidence is that Christ has won the victory over all principalities and powers and that thus victory will certainly become manifest if He is given the chance to do battle (Let My People Go, 1986, 21).



We, the Indigenous people of Australia have only recently begun to explore our own Indigenous cultural patterns and spirituality in relating the Gospel to our own contexts. In this process of contextualising the Gospel, what can Anglo-Celtic Christians do?

May I suggest that you allow and support us to explore our Indigenous spirituality, our sacred symbols, cultural stories, cultural designs and ceremonies? This is our inner world. A world in which we discover the mystery of our Creator – God, who Christ revealed.

May I also suggest that you allow and support us to develop Indigenous liturgies, our own forms of worship and forms of Christianity. This is our outer world, through which we express our faith in the creation, of God and salvation. Stand with us on our journey of exodus. We may stand but we will not fall. God holds us in the palm of his hand and he will guide us on our journey. We ask for your encouragement.

On this spiritual journey there is room for Anglo-Celtic Christians and Indigenous Christians, for mutual support and interaction. In the past, we have all made mistakes. Your basket and my basket have not always contained food that has been good for us. Through faith, we learn what parts of our cultural are unhelpful for us. In God's grace, we can fill our baskets with new food. Each of us has heard the message that we carry in these baskets- our cultural baskets – it is time for us to combine the good food from these baskets and to feed each other from them. As we have learned and been freed from the Anglo-Celtic basket, we invite you to learn and be fed from the Indigenous Christian basket. We invite you to sample from the Indigenous culture and Christian "Epei."

I want to give you one more image from the Torres Strait to show how God is alive in our culture. Back home, at big celebrations, we cook our food in a pit-fire which we call an Amey.

(describe the process of making an Amey)

When I think about an Amey, I can see so much that reminds me of the Gospel. We know that God is our Rock. And in an Amey, God is like the rocks that cook the



food. We know that Jesus went into the tomb and was raised up from the ground. He was transformed into the bread of life that feeds us. In a pit fire, the food is buried and is transformed into something nourishing for all of us. The fire and the heat is like the redeeming power of God to make us new people.

An Amey doesn't just happen. You have to sweat for that food. It takes a lot of work to dig the hole and build up the fire. When people are preparing an Amey, everybody comes together and works with each other. This is my image of reconciliation. We are all one people of God. There is room for Anglo-Celtic Christians and Indigenous Christians, for mutual support and interaction. Tolerance, learning and interaction will enrich our mission in Australia, which includes working towards liberation, reconciliation and unity in Christ.

When an Amey is ready, the beautiful, sweet savor draws people from miles around. Everybody comes together to celebrate and share in the goodness, like the church comes together to share in the goodness of God. White and black, red and yellow, there are no divisions between people when an Amey is ready. Everyone is able to be fed.

So, brothers and sisters, our Indigenous baskets contain all good things from our culture and background that will help us to tell God's message clearly to the people of today. Our basket, called the Dilly bag in Aboriginal culture, the Li in the Western Islands and the Epei in the Eastern Islands are full of traditions that the Holy spirit can use to call people to faith and action.

As we keep the links with our traditions, soil and lands, let us pray that as we move to a new beginning, God's Holy Spirit will fill our baskets with the food of faith, liberty action and unity.