

Thinking About Peacebuilding in Australia: Approaching St. Patrick's Day, Sunday March 17 And Anticipating Easter

13 March 2024

Bishop Philip Huggins

Director, Centre for Ecumenical Studies



In his vibrant State of the Union address the U.S. President, Joe Biden, referenced what he loves about America.

This includes the way it has become a home and place of freedom for many, including his forebears who escaped the poverty of Ireland.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/03/07/remarks-of-president-joe-biden-state-of-the-union-address-as-prepared-for-delivery-2/>

What President Biden says is also true about us. We are all Australians, no matter how long we have been here. And what the US President said about his Irish forebears, who came not freely but when 'famine struck', resonates with some of us who also celebrate St. Patrick, Patron Saint of Ireland.

In Hugginstown, near Kilkenny, there is a Church dedicated to the Most Holy Trinity.

<https://www.buildingsofireland.ie/buildings-search/building/12403114/catholic-church-of-the-most-holy-trinity-hugginstown-hugginstown-kilkenny>

And so one feels very close to St. Patrick who gives us his Trinitarian 'Breastplate' Prayer and Song, below.

<https://mycatholic.life/catholic-prayers/breastplate-of-saint-patrick/>
https://youtu.be/fCu-6dbtI9A?si=d9n_iWtWTMJ6JseK

But aside from this, there is another link that is much more important in its life-giving and contemporary relevance. Early in March, at the Adelaide Writers Week, we listened to Richard Flanagan, also with Irish forebears, speak about his new book 'Question 7'.

<https://www.penguin.com.au/books/question-7-9781761343452>

He offered many insights. One was to also contest the false dichotomy, in some rhetoric, between Australia's Indigenous and European cultures. The influence of the Indigenous culture on those of us with a European background means we are now something different to a European culture.

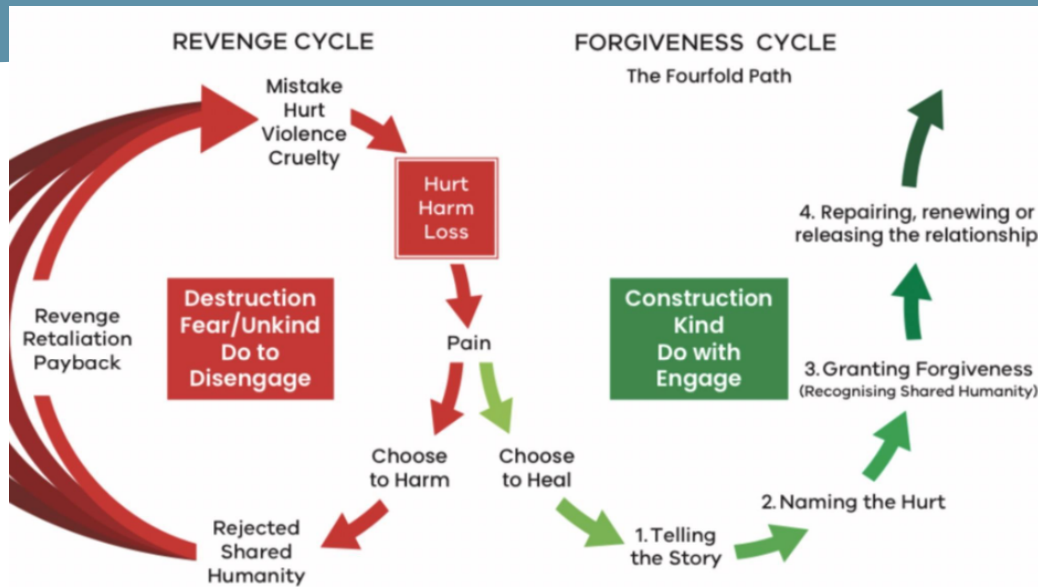
We are much as President Biden describes the USA - a place where people of many cultural backgrounds have come for freedom and opportunity. 'We are Australian' - a work in progress...

In this context, on Sunday we can be particularly grateful for the influence of indigenous Christian souls who, somehow, see and have seen what is embodied in St. Patrick's Breastplate about Jesus, notwithstanding all the mistakes made by the Church and all the reasons they have for feeling resentful.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-03-08/lowitja-o-donoghue-farewelled-in-state-funeral/103563590>

Relatedly, I sat next to Pastor James, an Indigenous Christian Pastor at a January dinner in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.





He described his soul-journey out of suffering, resentment and hate to a life of peacebuilding and reconciliation, because of the grace of Jesus.

<https://youtu.be/pM7CbHONn98?si=Rm4z8KOSqclJxylG>

So what does all this mean as we sing and pray St. Patrick's Breastplate, wearing green and on the watch for leprechauns? What does all this mean as Easter 2024 approaches, drawing us closer to the 2000 year anniversary of the actual event?

In a world of both beauty and horror, as in the old saying, if we are without hope we are like dead people walking.

With hope, linked with others in a fabric of affection, we can imagine and create better days together.

We are Australian and what we can yet be is quite possibly wonderful.

If, that is, we can be better peacebuilders, inwardly and outwardly. Hence our March 22 gathering, as attached:

<https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/inner-peace-outer-peace-tickets-855594384837>

To conclude, Richard Flanagan also spoke in Adelaide about his father's terrible suffering as a war prisoner in Japan.

He quoted another from that time, Tom Uren, who said simply, after his suffering in Japan and what he saw: 'There's no future in hate.'

<https://icanw.org.au/>

From his place in the prisoner of war camp, Tom Uren saw the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. When he subsequently learned of the horrific suffering, that day when 'the sky was crimson', he became a compelling peacemaker. You would think that the suffering we are now seeing, including on and after October 7, would also compel international leaders to negotiate a peaceful future.

There is no future in hate. Can this not become our politics? Our ability to feed the hungry and prevent catastrophic climate change, along with other global challenges, is so compromised by the politics of hate, suffering and trauma, including on and since October 7.

The life giving choice is to heal and never to harm, as John Hendry's diagram conveys:

<https://www.parentsvictoria.asn.au/issues/john-hendry-oam/>

Regarding this choice, Richard Flanagan spoke movingly of the unexpected visit his dad received in Tasmania, years later, from some Japanese women. They came all that way to ask forgiveness.

Younger women who had not been part of the war crimes generation.

One older woman, herself a survivor of the firebombing of Tokyo. Richard described the 'dignity and grace' with which these dear women asked forgiveness. It had, he said, an immense effect on his dad and all who listened. It was, Richard said, 'soothing, healing and redeeming'...

These themes vividly anticipate Holy Week, beginning with Palm Sunday on 24 March.

We have unquenchable hope because of what happened at Easter. 'Love lives again that with the dead has been.'

<https://youtu.be/vpU01KQIUJM?si=JHIQY-c7fQfoadL>

In the Easter Gospels, the Risen Jesus gives those anxious, frightened first disciples, peace. This peace is for everyone.

Given this beautiful peace, we are encouraged to live in Jesus' giving and forgiving way as peacemakers. We are encouraged to always make the choice to heal, never to harm. It has always been thus. But has there ever been a time when the need for our peacemaking is more obvious?