

# **WORDS OF POWER AND FREEDOM: THE BIBLE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE IN AUSTRALIA**

*John W Harris*

***'If you want to keep people subjugated, the last thing you place in their hands is a Bible. There's nothing more radical, nothing more revolutionary, nothing more subversive against injustice and oppression than the Bible.'***

(Archbishop Desmond Tutu) <sup>1</sup>

In 1611 a remarkable committee set up by King James 1<sup>st</sup> of England produced the King James Version of the Bible, the most influential book in the history of the world, published in uncountable millions, still in print and still read 400 years later.<sup>2</sup>

The King James Bible came into being at a moment when the world - or at least the English-speaking world - was ready for change; for spiritual, political and social change. Still within living memory was the time when the English Bible was banned, when throughout the whole of so-called Christian Europe, to own a Bible in your own language was a crime against both Church and State, when translators and even readers could be burned at the stake. The first question ever asked in the terrible European Inquisition was whether the accused knew any Scripture in their own language.

What did those in religious and secular power so desperately fear? Mostly they feared the loss of their own wealth, status and power. In a strange way they understood the message of liberation and equality the Bible proclaimed. They feared the power of that message of freedom in the hands of the common people. They did not want the people to discover that they could cast off the yoke of oppression.

Into that subjugated world came the beautifully-translated King James Version of the Bible with its memorable cadences proclaiming freedom, justice and equality, proclaiming a God whose authority was far greater than that of earthly kings, proclaiming a Jesus who belonged to all, a Jesus through whom all could come to God without the intervention of the church hierarchy, a Jesus who preached healing for the sick, bread for the hungry, sight for the blind and freedom for the prisoner - and a Jesus who calls us to follow him.

This had always been the message of the Bible and always will be, but in the thoughtfully-crafted prose and poetry of the KJV, this message was expressed anew and available to all, a message made abundantly clear to a people whom history had peculiarly prepared, not only to hear it, but to respond to it. As the translators had so passionately hoped, it became heard, read and understood by the people; a Bible which, in the translators own words, '*openeth the window to let in the light*'.<sup>3</sup>

***The King James Bible changed the way people understood their relationship to God. It changed the way they lived their lives and it changed the way they faced their death.***

Because it changed people, the KJV had the power to change society. Every literate person now had access to the Bible, often the only book they owned. No wonder they called it THE BOOK. In the Bible, ordinary folk recorded their births, their marriages and their deaths. Children learned to read by mouthing its words .

*I am one of those children, one of the very last I suspect. I learned to read from the King James Version of the Bible. The first word I ever learned to read was 'Jesus'. A fidgety little child in church, my mother used to pass me her Bible. 'Find Jesus, Johnny', she used to say, 'Find Jesus'. I used to look for the big capital J and pass the Bible to her for her approval each time I found it. Finding Jesus was the most important lesson my mother ever taught me.*

From the King James Bible, people learned the potential power of books. This inexorably led to an entirely new spirit of inquiry through reading and reflection, accelerating the growth of commercial printing and the ever-widening circulation of books.

Free to interpret the Bible according to the light of their own understanding, people began to feel they also had the right to question the authority of both religious and secular institutions. Stimulating reformation within the Church, it led also to the reduction of the power of the monarchy and the rise of constitutional government. Carried far beyond the shores of England, oppressed peoples found in it the hope of freedom. The King James version of the Bible underpinned great social reforms including the abolition of slavery. It was the King James Version of the Bible which finally created liberty and democracy.

I respect those who maintain with undeniable intellectual integrity that liberty and democracy were born of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment, the offspring of the Age of Reason. I have no intention of downplaying the importance of the Enlightenment. I would contend however that the

Enlightenment was itself a result or at the very least a continuation of the movement for the vernacular Bible – the Bible in the language of the people. It is true that a component of the Enlightenment was a reaction against the power and domination of the Church but so unarguably was the desire for the vernacular Bible. The power of the institutional Church was most keenly experienced in Catholic Europe. It is not a mere historical accident that the Enlightenment is generally seen as having its most potent origins in France where the Catholic Church was still politically powerful – and, I have to say, where the Protestant Reformation had never really been able to take root and where reading the Bible in French, while not banned, was discouraged. In this paper, I can unfortunately only very briefly touch on this issue, but I agree with the great philosopher Bertrand Russell that the Enlightenment was the principal manifestation of the schism that began with Martin Luther.<sup>4</sup> His reaction against abuses by the Church was most completely expressed by his translation of the Bible into German, into the language of the people. It was from the text of the vernacular Bible that people learned their equality in the sight of God. It was this understanding which made the Enlightenment possible and this crucial understanding did not come out of nowhere.

But I must return to the topic of tonight’s lecture, the role of the Bible in the quest for freedom and equality.

In the struggle for justice and human rights in the world, Moses’ impassioned call from the Exodus narrative to *‘Let my people go!’* has been a potent catch cry of liberation movements. It was widely used in the campaign against apartheid in South Africa. For more than a century across the Atlantic it had already been sung by black Americans in the words of their spirituals,

*When Israel was in Egypt's land: Let my people go!  
Oppressed so hard they could not stand: Let my People go!*

It should be no surprise that the understanding of the God of the Bible as a God who loves justice, and who will finally ordain freedom in the world , is found frequently in the folk songs of the poor and marginalised of the earth.

*I had a little book that was given to me.  
And every page spelled liberty.  
All my trials Lord, soon be over.*

Many spirituals express suffering but at the same time also declare a strong Biblical faith in a God who knows and understands the struggles of his people.

*Nobody knows the troubles I've seen.  
Nobody knows but Jesus.*

Interestingly, Jesus has been written out of some more modern de-Christianised versions of this spiritual when recorded commercially. Thus, little by little is progressed the lie that human beings, of their own will, brought an end to oppression and slavery, by this kind of subtle revisionism the falsehood is perpetuated that human beings, all unaided, created a society on the path to justice and equality purely by the upward trajectory of their own thinking, the delusion that goodness can of itself evolve.

There was another dimension to these songs of clear Biblical faith. They voiced also an acceptance that oppression and pain may not actually be ended in this life but will only finally be put right in the next life.

*River Jordan is deep and wide. Hallelujah.  
Milk and honey on the other side. Hallelujah.*

It is deceptively easy in an affluent post-Christian society to see this kind of Biblical faith in a just future as merely an outdated notion, an example of Karl Marx's categorising of religion as the 'opiate of the masses', the arrogant claim of the intelligentsia that religion was the refuge of the unenlightened, teaching an illusory happiness, that religion was an evolutionary phase which we now need to move beyond – or even, in Marx's terms, to abolish altogether in order for people to attain their real potential.

But where may I ask now are the much-vaunted worldly utopias, the secular heavens-on-earth of the great atheist philosophers? Where is the industrious but happy classless society of Marx and Engels? Where are the productively fulfilling villages of Mao's cultural revolution? Where is Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea and the Khmer Rouge's self-sufficient agrarian communities? Has the Shining Path ever led to life or is it only ever death?

Is it not worth considering the historical truth that so many great social changes for the good, for the constructive betterment of society, have been achieved by those who acted out of a belief in a power beyond themselves, a power who was most clearly served by striving for the good

of humankind. I cannot help but ask if there are not many good things in the world which could not or would not have been achieved without people with a faith in a God who cared about the world and who expected people to act for the good of those around them. I cannot help thinking of the deep personal Christian faith of Dag Hammarskjöld, perhaps the greatest of the UN General Secretaries, and his personal dictum, 'the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action'. I cannot help but think of William Wilberforce, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. Were they merely decent, well-intentioned people who were in the end deluded? Has society outgrown the need for the Bible and the God the Bible proclaims? Was Jesus of Nazareth insightful about the human condition and well-meaning but in the end, deluded?

I was a few years ago privileged to be involved with the Cambodian Christians who were translating the Khmer Bible. They were remarkable people who had been brutalised, scarred and lost loved ones to torture and death under the aggressively secular Khmer Rouge regime. Translating the Bible was, for them, part of the healing process. In it they could dare once again to use words like forgiveness and hope. In it they could sense again the promise of a life that was good and wholesome: they could believe in a future.

For many years, the desire for freedom and justice has been given words by the Bible and, in the English-speaking world, by the text of the King James Bible. When Abraham Lincoln began his Gettysburg Address with the words '*four score and seven years ago*', he was consciously grounding his speech in the familiar but powerful words of the King James Version and when he concluded with his famous pronouncement that government 'of the people, by the people and for the people *'shall not perish from the earth'*, he was again calling upon the collective intellectual and emotional resonance of an audience steeped in the Bible's phrases.

When Martin Luther King began his legendary '*I have a dream*' speech with the words '*five score years ago*,' not only was he linking himself to Lincoln's speech but to the words of that same King James Version of the Bible that had entered the hearts and minds of his fellow Afro-Americans. And the rest of the speech overflows with Biblical allusions. When he spoke of '*coming out of great tribulation*', of '*justice rolling down like water*', of the day when "*the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together*", he was calling forth the Biblical images in the soul of his black countrymen and women that had sustained them and would continue to sustain them in their pursuit of freedom and justice.

We could go on. When Nelson Mandela used phrases such as *'the valley of darkness'* and *'seeing the light'* and *'manifesting the glory of God'*, he too was employing Biblical imagery – incidentally the same phrases and the same liberating thrust of the same Bible he had read and grown to love in prison. The great speeches about the path from bondage to freedom can hardly fail to employ these images, whether the authors realise it or not.

A powerful example of belief in the power of the Bible's clear message of the equality of all people in the sight of God was the spontaneous and unified reaction among Christians to the very public denigration of Aboriginal people in the Sydney press, prior to the infamous Myall Creek massacre trial when 7 white men were on trial for the murder of 28 black men, women and children. Public clamour reached fever pitch with many openly calling for the release of the accused men.<sup>5</sup> In countering this, the very phrases of the King James Version of the Bible were called upon time and time again as Sydney preachers proclaimed Aboriginal equality from every pulpit and thundered their condemnation of settler brutality. The controversial John Dunmore Lang reminded his congregation in Scots Church that Aboriginal people were *'bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh – formed originally after the image of God'*.<sup>6</sup> John Saunders told Sydney Baptists that all of humanity was of one species, descended from Adam and Eve. Just prior to the trials he chose his text most carefully from Isaiah.

*For behold the Lord cometh out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity; the earth shall also disclose her blood, and no more cover her slain. (Isaiah 26:21)*

Saunders' sermon was thoroughly Biblical. *'Wilt thou despise the Saviour of the world?'* he asked. *'Then despise not him who sprang out of the same stock, despise not him for whom Christ died.'*<sup>7</sup> So forthright was Saunders in condemning those who supported the men accused of the Myall Creek atrocity that the *Sydney Herald* sued him for libel. We are right to see that Lang and Saunders were both purposely using the Bible – the King James Bible – and intending their listeners to be swayed by its authority.

The jury at the first trial found the defendants not guilty and one of the jurors declared publicly that the jury knew well that the accused were guilty but that *'I for one would never see a white man suffer for shooting a black'*.<sup>8</sup> Against the unrelenting pressure of public opinion and politically-powerful landowners, Attorney-General John Plunkett, himself a staunch Catholic Christian, put together a much more careful and solid set of

evidence and ordered a retrial in which a new jury found the perpetrators guilty.

Archbishop John Bede Polding, who heard the confessions of the accused men, broached the subject again in a pastoral letter in 1869 when anti-Aboriginal feeling was again running high,

*The stain of blood is upon us...Shall we not protest against this?...Some of our fellow colonists...have, in justification of a great crime, striven to believe that these black men are not of our race, are not fellow creatures. We Catholics know how assuredly false this is; we know that one soul of theirs is, like one of our own, of more worth than the whole material world, that any human soul is of more worth, as it is of greater cost than the whole mere matter of this earth ...<sup>9</sup>*

Whilst we may not be surprised to hear these strong Biblical sentiments from a Church leader, it still takes courage and not all Church leaders are always courageous enough to express unpopular truths. The decision not to court criticism but instead refrain from speaking out against injustice is a decision any of us Christians can take which makes the actions of a senior public servant like Plunkett all the more admirable.

There is a none-too-subtle rewriting of history which is taking place before our eyes with the deliberate down-playing and even omission of the spiritual dimension of the motivation of Christians like Plunkett, and countless others, whose actions for the public good were inspired by their deep religious convictions. It is simply bad historiography. Of course I do not suggest in any way that people who are not Christians do not ever act for the public good. Of course many do and Christians like me are humbled to see such evidence that all people are created with God's image in their internal being and that people can still choose if they wish to reflect the essential goodness of God, even if they never acknowledge or even know its source.

In a country like Australia it is, however, an interesting question to ask how many of those who act for the good of the community, do so in accordance with a Christian ethic which they inherited from a previous generation. I suspect that there is a younger generation of historians, journalists and commentators who are not themselves people of faith and who therefore do not appreciate the faith dimension in the motivation of many people.

We in Bible Society are rather proud of our pedigree as Australia's oldest continuing institution. We rather like saying that we were founded on the

7<sup>th</sup> March 1817, one month before Westpac, then the Bank of NSW. Of much more interest to me is that every board member of Australia's first bank was also a member of the board of the Bible Society. Is this just some kind of coincidence? Is this fact of no historical significance? Is it not important that a group of men whose personal faith led them to give of their time, money and expertise to the distribution of the Bible in the colony of NSW were also men who saw it as their civic duty to advance the welfare of the fledgling colony by establishing a bank to make commercial transactions open to all citizens?

Our own Commonwealth Parliament provides many interesting case studies. God is neither left or right wing and many leading political figures on both sides of politics have publicly acknowledged their Christian faith – people such as Robert Menzies, John Howard, Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott. But also very significant in Australian parliamentary history are those leaders who, while not necessarily people of personal Christian faith, were people who grew up in very Christian homes and who learned their ethics and values in a Christian context - Bob Hawke, Kim Beasley and Julia Gillard to name just a few.

In this the King James Bible's 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, a number of fair-minded atheists have acknowledged this reality : they know how much they are inheritors of freedoms and a life-style due entirely to the one over-riding historical fact that we were once a society which unashamedly drew its core values from the Christian Bible. Christopher Hitchens described its language as '*something timeless*'. Richard Dawkins urged that '*our schools bring this precious piece of our heritage to all our children*'. Another fair-minded atheist is our own prime minister, Julia Gillard. Recently interviewed on *Sky News*, Ms Gillard said it was important for people to understand their Bibles,

*"...not because I'm an advocate of religion - clearly I'm not - but once again, what comes from the Bible has formed such an important part of our culture. It's impossible to understand Western literature without having that key of understanding the Bible stories and how Western literature builds on them and reflects them and deconstructs them and brings them back together".<sup>10</sup>*

Ms Gillard was acknowledging the indebtedness we owe the Bible for what she labelled our 'culture', that is our Western life style. As she well knows, this includes those two areas to which she has devoted her life - the rights of the worker and parliamentary democracy.

There is a deep question behind all this: **Can we embrace the principle of freedom, justice and equality for all human beings while**



**discarding its source?** The struggle to achieve the great social reforms we have already considered was spearheaded by people whose strong belief in the equality of all humankind sprang from an unshakable confidence that that equality was first and foremost an equality in the sight of God. Can we inherit and maintain that same resolute belief in human equality and deny the validity of its basis? Can we embrace the benefits of Biblical justice and equality and at the same time discard the God of the Bible?

With what do we replace the message of the Bible? What makes human beings equal anyway? Are we to understand human equality as the inevitable consequence of some upward force of disembodied goodness in human evolution? When *Homo Erectus* was born of *Australopithecus*, was there a genetic change along with the more upright stance and enlarged cranial capacity that would predispose us to acting justly? Did something happen between *Homo Erectus*, *Homo Neanderthalis* and *Homo Sapiens* that would modify the principle of survival of the fittest to allow equal rights to all humans, irrespective of skin colour, gender, age, intelligence, disability, body shape or any other characteristic? Does human society inevitably evolve towards justice and equality for all?

My reading of the world in which I live is that this is not so. I do not see such an inevitable upward social evolution. I see justice and freedom enjoyed by fortunate societies like ours which once found their inspiration for change in the message of the Bible. I see the the awful injustices in societies which do not have what we have – in Somalia and North Korea and Iran. And I see Tiananmen Square and the common people of Egypt and Syria and Libya prepared to engage in costly struggle to gain what they do not have but what we regard as ours by right. I see the the way in which those freedoms we now accept as our birthright did not simply evolve, did not come from our DNA, but derived originally from a belief in that message of liberty, of equality in the sight of that God whom the Bible proclaims. And I see that we can become too blasé, too accepting of what we regard as our birthright without giving thought to the ultimate Author of the Bible whose message of equality lies at the basis of all that is good in what we have become.

There is here in Australia a wealth of stories about ordinary people who have read the Bible and absorbed its teachings. The direct influence of the Bible, and in particular of the King James Bible, can indeed be discerned in the words and actions of these to whom the tradition of reading the Bible had become part and parcel of their Christian lives. It affected them and they in turn went on to make a difference in the lives of others.

This often seemed more evident in the lives of ordinary Australian Christians than perhaps it did in the lives of some of the more rich and powerful. If we go back a century and a half, books were in short supply in Australia in the mid 1800s and in many ways this resembled England in the mid 1600s. If people owned any book at all it was the Bible, the King James Bible, and ordinary people with little else to read became very familiar with it. In Moonta, SA, in 1868, young local butcher, Robert Vawser used to write to his future wife and I once came across his letters in a library. He wrote that he read his Bible while on his rounds delivering meat in his horse and cart and found it '*a goldfield full of precious nuggets*'.<sup>11</sup> People like Robert Vawser were, without ever knowing it, a fulfilment of the dreams of the translators of the English Bible. He was reading the book that '*openeth the windows to let in the light*'. He was the fulfilment of the dreams of the early English Bible translators who risked their lives for what they called the Englishing of the Bible. They dreamed of the Bible in the hands of the common people, in the hearts and on the lips of the ploughman at his plough or the weaver at his shuttle, reciting the words of Scripture as they worked.

People who regularly and seriously read their Bible can hardly fail to absorb its message. Such was the young adventurer Daniel Matthews on the Victorian goldfields, angered at the unjust treatment meted out to Aboriginal people, and led to set up his mission and refuge at Cummeragunja on the Murray River. Such too was his compassionate wife Janet, giving away a treasured piece of clothing to an Aboriginal girl.

*I gave Louisa an old chemise, one I wore when I was married. It was rather a struggle to give it - but I thought of 'In as much as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren ye have done it unto me.'*<sup>12</sup>

These words of Jesus from Matthew 25:40 once so inspired the care of the less fortunate that in past generations the opening phrase 'in as much' was alone sufficient to call to mind all the meaning of the sentence. I remember my mother coming back inside and closing the front door after giving food or clothing to a homeless man. '*In as much..*', she used to say, as she quietly sighed to herself. The phrase still survives here and there, such as in the name of the Inasmuch Aged Care facility at Sussex Inlet on the NSW South coast.

It is hardly surprising to find Bible-reading labourers involved in movements seeking justice for the exploited working classes. Boilermaker J S T McGowen, who was to become the first Labor Premier of NSW in 1910, spent a lifetime fighting tirelessly for the rights of workers, the

construction of public facilities and assistance to disadvantaged children. 'Honest Jim' McGowen made many political enemies but no one ever doubted his personal integrity and moral character. In the book *Christ and Labour*, he wrote that we should follow the example of Jesus, the 'Nazarene Carpenter'.

*We raise our hats and bow our heads with reverence to the Commandments as they came down from Mount Sinai. But we believe that the Eleventh Commandment is the Commandment that we want above all others to practise, and that is, to love our neighbour as ourselves and to do to others as we would they should do unto us.*<sup>13</sup>

After his death he was described as having the qualities of 'loyalty and honesty, sobriety and amiability, moderation and altruism,' adjectives rarely applied these days to politicians of either side of the house.

Another key figure in the early trade union movement was W G Spence. Largely self-taught, he became widely read in the Bible, the classics, political ideas and economics and influenced by socialist authors like Robert Blatchford, John Ruskin and William Morris. His mentors, he said, were Karl Marx, Jesus and St Paul. By almost universal consent, Spence was regarded by his contemporaries as a good and godly man. His great grandfather was a noted Presbyterian minister in Scotland and his parents were staunch adherents of the same church. His mother taught her two sons to read from the Bible before they were six, and Spence later became and remained throughout his life an elder in the Presbyterian Church.

New Unionism, he wrote in 1892, '*was simply the teaching of that greatest of all social reformers, Him of Nazareth, whom all must revere*'.<sup>14</sup> Spence cared greatly about improving the life of working class families. In one of his books, *The Child the Home and the State*, he used Matthew 6:25 as a chapter heading: *Is not the life more than meat?* In a thought-provoking extension of Jesus' words, he argued that a worker indeed deserved more than meat, that workers had a right to a decent home and family life and not merely the bare essentials of bread and butter.<sup>15</sup> After his death another politician, George Black, described him as '*a gentle and kindly old man whose life had been spent mainly in the interest of his fellows*'.

Another great Labour leader moulded by his experience of childhood poverty was Jack Lang, the 'Big Fella', a committed Catholic who eventually became the controversial Premier of NSW. While he rarely quoted the Bible directly, he had a clever way with Biblical imagery which

often drew upon less known parts of Scripture and thus revealed that he had read it and absorbed it. He referred to himself, for example, as 'a *political Ishmael*' and declared that Australia was being asked to '*sacrifice to the Moloch of Mammon*'.<sup>16</sup> As a young man he owned a horse and buggy and tried to assist poor families evicted from their homes into the street. He took the motto of St Vincent as his own: '*The Charity of Christ Urges Us On*', which is 2 Corinthians 5:14 as translated from the Latin Vulgate: '*Caritas Christi Urget Nos*'.

Yet another legendary Christian advocate for justice for the working class was Ben Chifley. His famous '*Light on the Hill*' speech clearly drew its inspiration from Matthew 5:14. Chifley frequently asserted that the Great Depression had deeply affected him, that it had '*forced the iron into his soul*'. Chifley was a practising Catholic and it is interesting that in this his use of Psalm 105:10, his text is drawn from the Catholic Douay-Rheims version of the English Bible rather than the King James Version's less striking, '*I was laid in iron*'.

In Western NSW, Aboriginal activist and shearing shed union representative, William Ferguson, fought for both the rights of his Aboriginal people and the rights of his fellow workers in the shearing industry. He was often heard to quote Luke 10:7, '*The labourer is worthy of his hire*,' and Deuteronomy 25:4 '*Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn*'.<sup>17</sup>

Ferguson was one of a fascinating group of Australians who really knew their King James Bibles, those countless Indigenous Christians raised and schooled on Christian missions who in later life continued to love and read the Bible. Many of them developed an enviably deep, mature and uncomplicated grasp of its words and teaching. It is sobering indeed to see those same Biblical phrases, employed by advocates for freedom and justice such as Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela, so evident in a century of speeches and writings of Australian Indigenous leaders such as William Ferguson, Shadrach James, Margaret Tucker and David Unaipon, tenaciously struggling to assert the equality of all human beings in the sight of God. William Cooper, Victorian Aboriginal leader and an architect of the 1938 Aboriginal Day of Mourning was inspired by the Jesus' Messianic claim that he had come to bring deliverance to the captives. Cooper wrote in 1936, '*We have suffered enough, God knows, but the day of our deliverance is drawing nigh*'.<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, Cooper encountered and accepted Christianity at the Cumeragunja mission which Daniel Matthews' Christian faith and compassion had inspired him to set up in the first place. Historians Bain

Attwood and Andrew Markus suggest three ways in which Cooper's early encounter with Biblical religion shaped his political vision, and that of his contemporaries:

*First, Christian teachings were a powerful antidote to racism for Aborigines, as for other colonised peoples, since they proclaimed a vision of humanity that encompassed Aborigines, treating all peoples as God's children. Second, they presented God and religious principles as a form of authority that was distinct from and higher than government and its secular principles, and so was another source to which Aborigines could appeal. Third, Christianity offered a prophetic or predictive sense of history, a perspective on the unfolding of historical time that promised salvation for the down-trodden.<sup>19</sup>*

Another Aboriginal spokesperson, Margaret Tucker, also encountered the Bible during her days on the Cummeragunja mission. Tucker later pointed to Jesus' 'Sermon on the Mount' as holding out a standard for race relations:

*I found out...that whether you have wealth or whether you are penniless, you can try to live absolutely, wholly. It was summed up for me in Christ's Sermon on the Mount: absolute honesty, absolute purity, of motive, unselfishness and love for all races.*

In South Australia, in 1895, when the Aboriginal people were unjustly evicted from the Poonindie Aboriginal Mission so that white farmers could have their land, some fair-minded South Australians labelled the unjust transaction 'Naboth's Vineyard', a reference to the Biblical story of the murder of Naboth by Queen Jezebel to unjustly gain his vineyard for King Ahab.

Evicted from the mission and a refugee in his own land, Aboriginal leader, Tom Adams, found solace, as so many oppressed people had found before and since, in the promise of the Bible that beyond the pain and unfairness of this life, a loving God would grant justice in the life which was yet to come. Adams wrote ,

*'We must through much trial and tribulation enter the Kingdom of heaven...We feel as if we are strangers in a strange land..the times are indeed hard with us but we know that here we have no continuing city but we seek one which is to come'.<sup>20</sup>*

Adams was recalling Hebrews chapter 13. Adams, Cooper, Tucker and Ferguson had been raised on the words of the King James Version of the Bible. These indigenous people had absorbed its images, its words and its

teachings and indeed they often expressed their frustration that white people, from whose language and culture had come the English Bible, seemed so unmoved by it and even ignorant of it.

In the lives of people such as William Ferguson, W G Spence and Janet Matthews - we clearly see the power of the Bible to change lives and then, in turn, to inspire those whose lives are changed to dedicate themselves to caring for the needs of others and to seeking the betterment of society.

For those for whom life is a struggle, those who are denied justice, those who are oppressed, the Bible declares that this must not always be so, that there will come a time when God's will '*will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven*', that all will have, in every sense of the word, their *daily bread*, that the hungry will be fed, the prisoners released, that the poor and the humble will inherit the earth, '*for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven*'.

It has been my privilege to have spent many years of my life assisting Aboriginal Christians to translate the Bible into their own languages - a passion which runs in my family. By a campfire in a remote Aboriginal community in 1945, the story of Jesus was read in the Wubuy language for the first time. The reader was my father, Len Harris and this is his story in his own words:

*'I asked the Nunggubuyu Christians to choose two translators, one who could speak English and one who could not. They chose two outstanding Christian women, Bidigainj, who knew no English, and Grace Yimambu. Grace had been the best English speaker at a mission school but had gone to live in the bush with her husband, a good thing because it kept her Wubuy language skills strong too.*

*Every day we sat under a tree outside my bark hut. I would explain the meaning of the words to Grace in English. Sometimes I tried my few halting words of Wubuy. Grace would then explain the words to Bidigainj in Wubuy. Together they would make a Wubuy sentence. Then they repeated the sentence slowly to me and I wrote it down on little scraps of paper. I then read it back to them. The two women used to laugh at my pronunciation but I didn't care at all. What we were doing interested me beyond anything I had ever done before. Never can I forget those first wonderful words: **Anambalaman analawu - the Good Story.***

*Whenever we finished a story about Jesus, the two women got very excited. At night I would go down to the camp near the river to sit with the people by the campfire and read them the new translation. They too were always very excited, keenly discussing the stories and always insisting that I read them again and again.*

*At the campfire one night, listening intently, was Bidigainj's brother, Madi, a powerful Nunggubuyu elder. After the second reading he got up from the fire and went away. No one knew where he had gone, but he had set off to walk back to his own country, the Nunggubuyu heartland around Rose River, two hundred miles to the north. There Madi and the other men made a little fleet of dug-out canoes and in them Madi brought sixty of his people back down the coast and up the Roper River. The journey took them two weeks, living on fish, turtles and water lilies.*

*So it was that one night, as I was reading some of the last chapters of Mark's Gospel by the campfire, that I glimpsed Madi in the firelight, standing just behind the eager listeners. I held up my handwritten sheets of paper.*

***"Anambalaman analawu," I said. The Good Story.***

***"Yuwai. Idjubulu," Madi replied. Yes. It is true.***

*Then sixty of his people emerged from the shadows to crowd around the fire. Madi had brought them to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ in their own language. God's Spirit felt close to us that evening. I read it and read it again, urged on by the listeners, over and over, long into the night. When at last my voice started to give out, they let me stop. Madi came forward and asked to hold in his hands the 'leaves' I had written on. I knew he could not read.*

***"Idjubulu." He said again. It is true.***

*He tried to speak but I did not understand. My Wubuy was not good enough for such deep thoughts. Madi signalled to Grace and Bidigainj to interpret for him. Through them he told me that he once used to think Jesus was the God only of the white man but that now he understood that Jesus was also also the God of the black man. I asked him which stories had impressed him, what had convinced him that the life of Jesus was true. He looked down at the sheets of paper and looked up at me again, his eyes bright in the firelight.*

***"It's not the stories," he said. "It's the words. Now I know that Jesus speaks Wubuy".'***

The descendants of Madi and his family have continued both his leadership and his Christian commitment. They are people who have most solidly committed themselves to the health and well-being of their community, the people who teach the Bible stories but also the people who teach the children their traditional bush skills. The evidence of the teachings of the Bible is clear in the beauty and courage of their personal

lives and in their strong commitment to the welfare of others.

In the Northern Territory in the 1970s, the Gospel<sup>21</sup> was translated into Aboriginal Kriol . The people then requested that they translate *Genesis* because of Aboriginal people's deep-seated interest in the beginning of things. In 1980, with *Genesis* complete, one more book could be translated for a small volume of the Scriptures to be published. The people's choice was unanimous. They wanted *Revelation*. They wanted to know, not just how everything began, but how it would end. They wanted to have in their own language the assurance that the way life was, in their damaged and struggling communities, was not the way life would always be. They wanted to know that God would indeed intervene in history and set everything right. They wanted to know that oppression would end, that injustice would cease, that pain and suffering would one day be no more. Here are some of the initial verses of Revelation Chapter 21. The words are meaningful indeed in Aboriginal Kriol, but in English they have never been better expressed more powerfully than in the timeless cadences of the King James Version.

*And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away...And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.*

*And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.*

*And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold I make all things new..It is done...I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end...*



1 Archbishop Desmond Tutu, September 2008.  
<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/bible.has.power.to.free.poor.tutu/21378.htm>

2 Many books have been recently published on the King James Version of the Bible because 2011 is its 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Of these, a very readable account of the translation and its political background is Wilson, Derek, 2010, *The People's Bible: The Remarkable History of the King James Version*, Oxford: Lion Hudson

3 *The Translators to the Reader*, Preface to the King James Version of the Bible, 1611

4 Russell, Bertrand, *A History of Western Philosophy*, pp 492-494

5 For a discussion of the Myall Creek massacre and Christian response to it, see Harris, John, *One Blood: 200 years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity*. Sutherland, Albatross pp 24-36

6 Lang, John Dunmore, 1838, *National Sins the Causes and Precursors of National Judgements*, Sydney, James Spilsbury p 15

7 *Colonist* (Sydney), 20 October 1838

8 *Australian*, 8 December 1838

9 Pastoral Letter of the Archbishop and Bishops of the Province...1869, *Reproduced in O'Farrell, P., 1969, Documents in Australian Catholic History*, Geoffrey Chapman, Melbourne pp 413-418

10 Gillard: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/julia-gillard-makes-stand-as-a-social-conservative/story-fn59niix-1226025066869>

11 Moonta Library, PRG576, 'Papers of Lily Vawser', R. Vawser to L. Secombe, 5 November 1886.

12 Janet Matthews' Diary, 20 October 1876, Norman Papers, PRG 422, State Library of South Australia

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14 *Australian Worker* 4 Jun 1892, p.1.

15 Spence, W G, 1908, *The Child the Home and the State*, Sydney : The Worker Print, p 7

16 Lang, Jack, 1962, *The Great Bust - The Depression of the Thirties*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, ch 58

17 Horner, Jack (Ferguson's Biographer), pers. com.

18 Australian Aborigines' League, *Annual Report*, 1936

19 Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *Thinking Black: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines' League*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004, p. 5

20 Hale Papers, PRG 275, 130/205, State Library of South Australia

21 The *Gospul* was a substantial, connected 'Gospel' drawn from the text of all four Gospels.