



KIT 3

IMA CHURCH RESOURCE KIT

January 26th

Introductory notes

These sermon notes are designed as a gentle lead into the discussion around the date of Australia Day, in light of the impact colonisation has had on Indigenous peoples of Australia. We approach it from the theological perspective of identity. Who are we if we make the British colonisation the defining narrative of being Australian? What is Australian identity from God's perspective? Who are we called to be as a nation?

Please read some additional resources around these ideas, and make this sermon your own. Add in your own illustrations that will connect with the group of people you are speaking to. You have a better understanding of the specific issues that members of your congregation might have with this content, so please adapt and add in any extra material that will help the message to be truly transformational.

Australians Together have produced some resources that help to explain the difficulty of the 26 January date for Aboriginal people, and some alternatives for what to do on Australia Day:

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

<https://australianstogether.org.au/discover/respond/10-things-to-do-this-australia-day>

<https://australianstogether.org.au/discover/australian-history/australia-day/>



If your congregation already has an exposure to the issues around Australia Day, and their hearts are sufficiently engaged, then a commemorative service or prayer vigil would be a great next step. Common Grace have a full service resource available that would we would heartily recommend. Mourning is an appropriate response to the suffering Indigenous people have experienced as a result of colonialism. In a really important way it will not be possible for Australia to move forward without properly dealing with the sins of colonialism. However, it may be too much for some people to deal with as a first exposure to the issues surrounding Australia Day. In which case it would be wiser to build towards that over a couple of years of discussion.

Kids Activity

If you include a kids story time in your service, or run a Sunday school program, you could use the following activity to introduce the idea of identity.

Who am I? (Celebrity Heads)

Pick three older kids and sit them up the front. Put a headband with a name written on it on their heads so everyone can see the name.

Each contestant takes a turn to ask questions about who they are:

“Am I tall?”

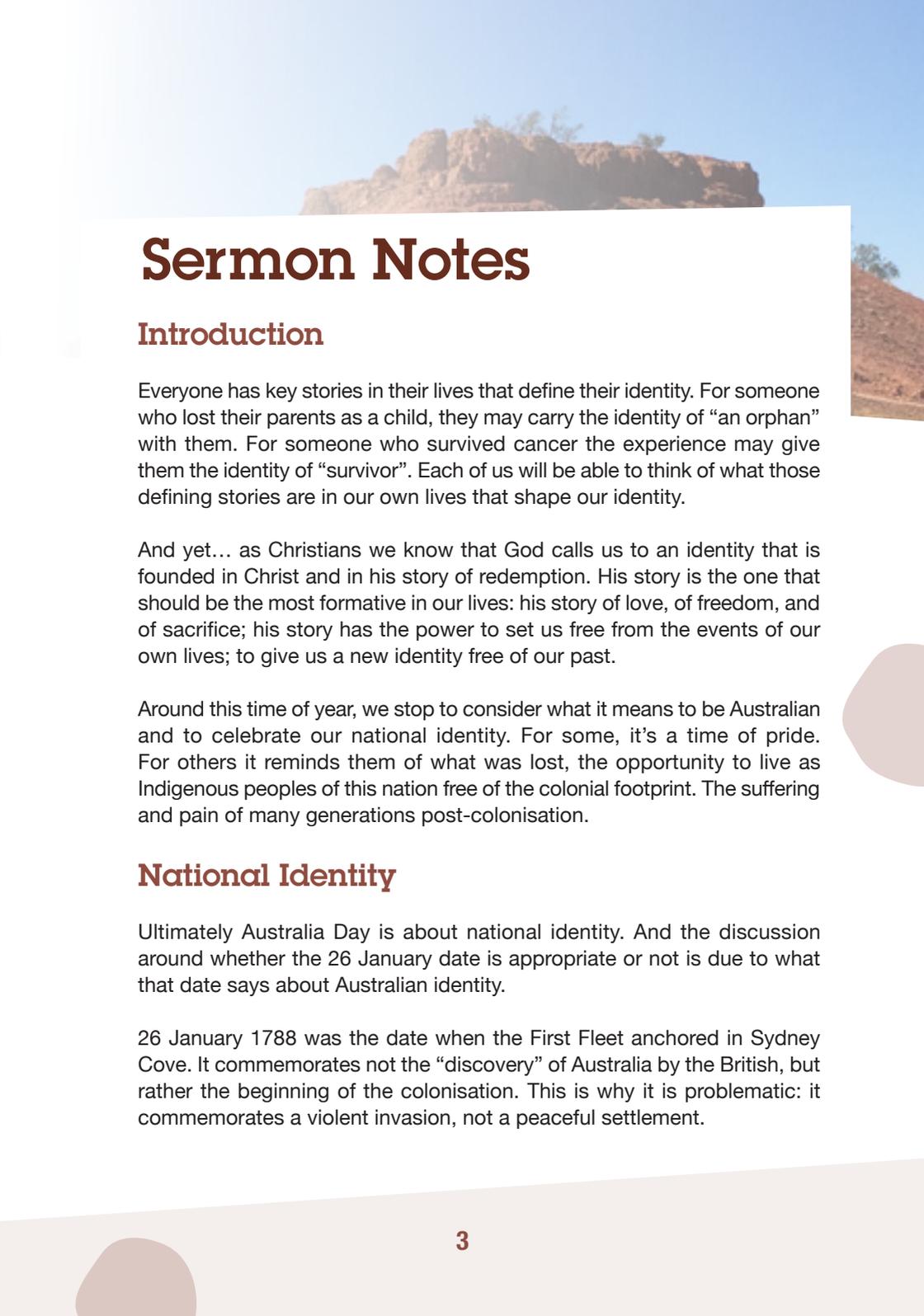
“Am I female?”

“Do I play a sport?” etc etc.

until they have narrowed down to who they are.

Provide a small prize for the winner.

If you are doing this activity in Sunday School then go on to talk about what it means to be Australian. Otherwise the topic will be furthered discussed in the sermon.



Sermon Notes

Introduction

Everyone has key stories in their lives that define their identity. For someone who lost their parents as a child, they may carry the identity of “an orphan” with them. For someone who survived cancer the experience may give them the identity of “survivor”. Each of us will be able to think of what those defining stories are in our own lives that shape our identity.

And yet... as Christians we know that God calls us to an identity that is founded in Christ and in his story of redemption. His story is the one that should be the most formative in our lives: his story of love, of freedom, and of sacrifice; his story has the power to set us free from the events of our own lives; to give us a new identity free of our past.

Around this time of year, we stop to consider what it means to be Australian and to celebrate our national identity. For some, it's a time of pride. For others it reminds them of what was lost, the opportunity to live as Indigenous peoples of this nation free of the colonial footprint. The suffering and pain of many generations post-colonisation.

National Identity

Ultimately Australia Day is about national identity. And the discussion around whether the 26 January date is appropriate or not is due to what that date says about Australian identity.

26 January 1788 was the date when the First Fleet anchored in Sydney Cove. It commemorates not the “discovery” of Australia by the British, but rather the beginning of the colonisation. This is why it is problematic: it commemorates a violent invasion, not a peaceful settlement.



Over the years that followed the First Fleet's landing, there was a systematic attempt to eliminate the Indigenous peoples of Australia. By 1900 it is estimated that 90% of the Indigenous population had been wiped out. That's attempted genocide. We really need to be truthful about that.

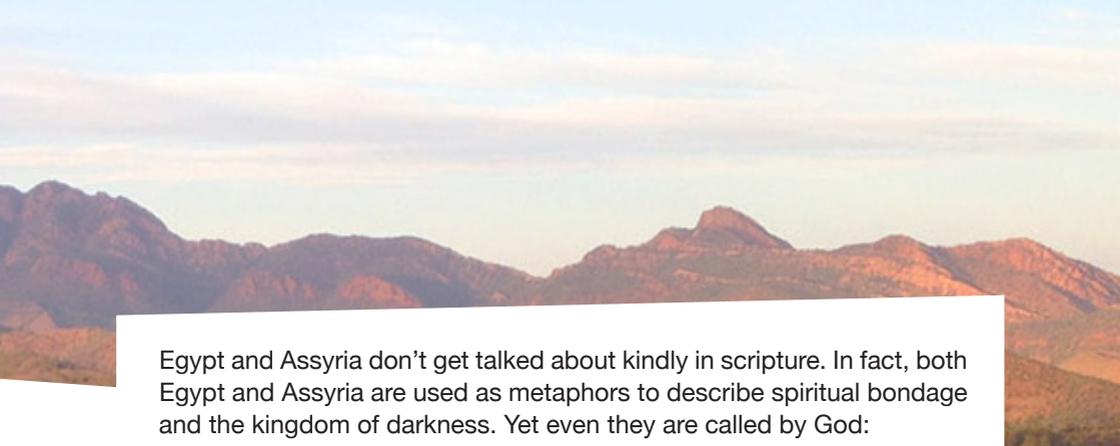
While there were various celebrations on or near 26 January for many years, it was not until 1994 that it became a national public holiday. So when we talk about whether it is appropriate to change the date, we are only talking about changing a tradition of 25 years. In the grand scheme of things that isn't a big change.

The problem with using 26 January as Australia Day is that it defines Australian national identity around colonisation. Even arguing that the date is inappropriate keeps the national discussion about identity centred on the issue of colonisation. Moving from that date would free up the national imagination to see ourselves in light of a different narrative.

Engaging Our Prophetic Imagination

One of the beautiful things about being a Christian is that we know that we do not have to be defined by our past. We have enjoyed the freedom that comes from Christ. We have been surprised by finding out that we are not who we thought we were. That the Spirit works in us conforming us to the image of Christ, restoring us into the people God created us to be. In light of that experience of new life and new identity, let's engage our prophetic imagination about what Australia's national identity could be if it didn't centre around colonisation / reaction to colonisation.

When God founded the nation of Israel in scripture, he did it by changing the names of the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob. The change of name was a call to a new identity. Abram, a childless idolator was called to be the Father of many nations. Jacob, a grasping swindler was called Israel—one who wrestles with God. What is God's name for Australia? What is the identity he is calling Australia to?



Egypt and Assyria don't get talked about kindly in scripture. In fact, both Egypt and Assyria are used as metaphors to describe spiritual bondage and the kingdom of darkness. Yet even they are called by God:

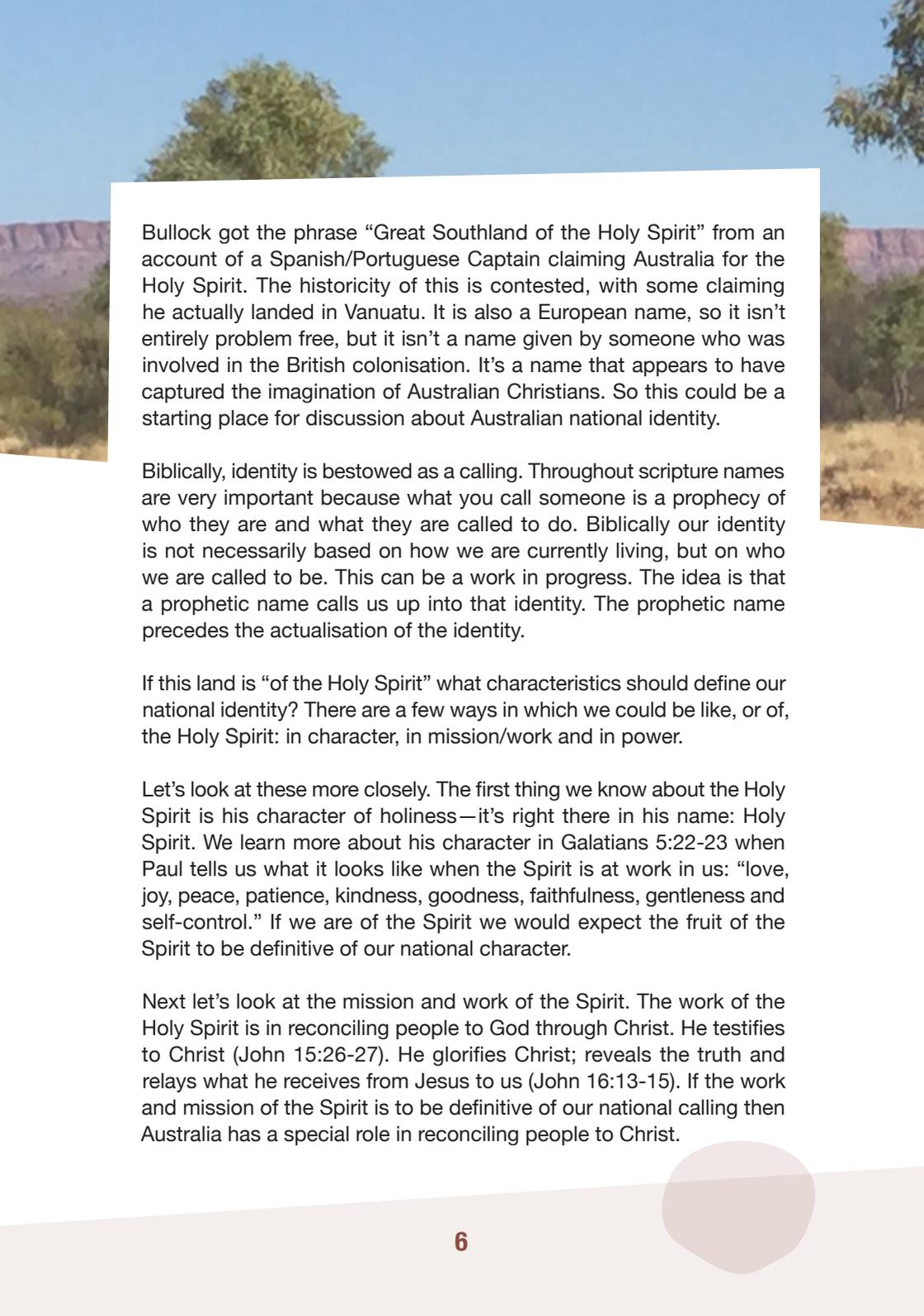
“On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.’” (Isa 19:24-25).

As a nation we have a past. We have walked in an identity framed by the history of colonisation and being the dumping ground for Britain's prison system. That tells us a story about who we are. Jesus' death and resurrection is the open door to a new national identity as much as it is the door for us as individuals to walk free of our pasts. Australia doesn't have to stay prisoner to the colonisation narrative.

One way of understanding Australia's identity that has become popular in some Christian circles is to speak of Australia as “the Great Southland of the Holy Spirit.” This name was popularised through the song of the same name by Geoff Bullock. The published version of this song reflects the colonisation centric view of Australia. However on hearing how upsetting the lyrics were for Aboriginal people whose presence it ignored, it was revised. Bullock wrote:

“Years, with their brokenness, pain and resurrection show us the wisdom of God that confounds our arrogant faith. I have had the privilege to rewrite this rather ignorant racist song to embrace the wisdom of my (Koori) brother who took the time, all those years ago, to show me grace, wisdom and patience. I dedicate this song to the faith of those whom Jesus reaches, in spite of our white middle class well intentioned endeavours.”¹

1. <https://sa.uca.org.au/documents/covenanting/reconciliation-sunday-2014/Great-South-Land.pdf>



Bullock got the phrase “Great Southland of the Holy Spirit” from an account of a Spanish/Portuguese Captain claiming Australia for the Holy Spirit. The historicity of this is contested, with some claiming he actually landed in Vanuatu. It is also a European name, so it isn’t entirely problem free, but it isn’t a name given by someone who was involved in the British colonisation. It’s a name that appears to have captured the imagination of Australian Christians. So this could be a starting place for discussion about Australian national identity.

Biblically, identity is bestowed as a calling. Throughout scripture names are very important because what you call someone is a prophecy of who they are and what they are called to do. Biblically our identity is not necessarily based on how we are currently living, but on who we are called to be. This can be a work in progress. The idea is that a prophetic name calls us up into that identity. The prophetic name precedes the actualisation of the identity.

If this land is “of the Holy Spirit” what characteristics should define our national identity? There are a few ways in which we could be like, or of, the Holy Spirit: in character, in mission/work and in power.

Let’s look at these more closely. The first thing we know about the Holy Spirit is his character of holiness—it’s right there in his name: Holy Spirit. We learn more about his character in Galatians 5:22-23 when Paul tells us what it looks like when the Spirit is at work in us: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” If we are of the Spirit we would expect the fruit of the Spirit to be definitive of our national character.

Next let’s look at the mission and work of the Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit is in reconciling people to God through Christ. He testifies to Christ (John 15:26-27). He glorifies Christ; reveals the truth and relays what he receives from Jesus to us (John 16:13-15). If the work and mission of the Spirit is to be definitive of our national calling then Australia has a special role in reconciling people to Christ.



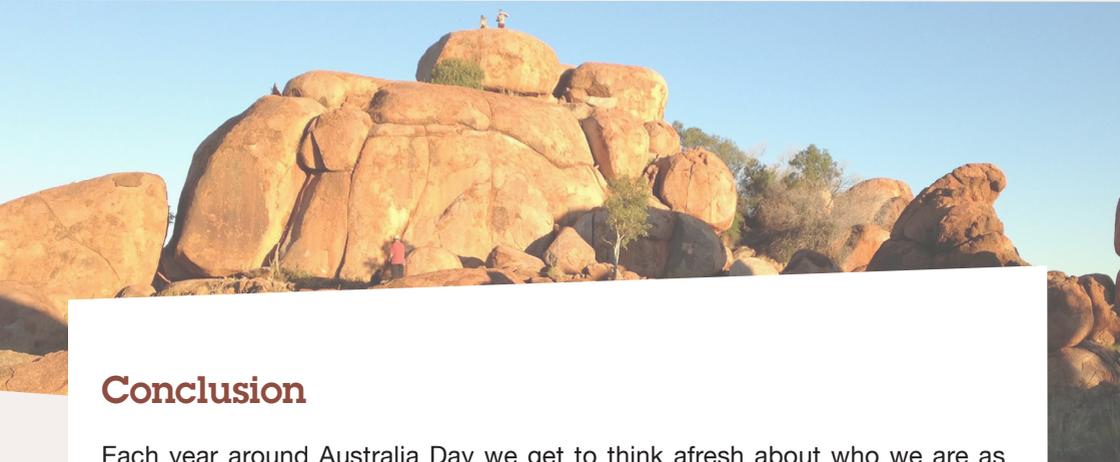
St Augustine described the Holy Spirit as the bond of love between the Father and the Son. This makes the Spirit the medium of community. So, as people called to be of the Spirit, we have a calling to be a community of love and to build community amongst others.

Finally, the power of the Spirit. This is displayed in scripture in various ways. Firstly, we see the power of the Spirit working to create: in Genesis 1 the Spirit hovered over the waters, bringing life to the earth. We see it also in the calling of Bezalel and Oholiab in Exodus 31 as artisans—the first time the Bible mentions someone being filled with the Spirit—making creativity an expression of the Spirit’s power.

Other expressions of the Spirit’s power are the gifts of the Spirit such as those listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28 and Romans 12:6-8.

If Australia is to be “of the Holy Spirit” then it should be normal for us to see and express the power of the Holy Spirit: through empowered creativity, and through the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit. Of the gifts Paul exhorts us to desire the gift of prophesy the most. So, if Australia is “of the Holy Spirit”, then we are a people called to speak prophetically.

It might be easy to be cynical listening to this description of the Spirit and thinking about how his character, work and power might define our national identity. However, we must remember it’s a calling before it’s lived out. Just because we aren’t there now doesn’t mean we will never get there.



Conclusion

Each year around Australia Day we get to think afresh about who we are as Australians. The current date which commemorates the First Fleet anchoring in Sydney Cove is problematic. It keeps our national discussion centred on the colonisation as definitive of Australian identity. Even arguing for a different date reactively keeps colonisation front and centre.

The gospel which provides the possibility of new life and new identity in Christ means that we can be free of that past. By engaging our prophetic imagination we can begin to see Australia through God's eyes. And begin to hear who he says we are. And begin to live into that identity and calling.

Around this time of year is a good time to be praying and asking the Lord to reveal who He has called Australia to be. To reveal not only to the Church but also to the whole nation who we could be. Ultimately, as a nation, we need an alternate vision that is compelling enough to call us up out of our past and into a new future. Only God has that vision. Only God is imaginative and creative enough to be able to take us from where we have been and form us into a nation that displays his goodness to the world.

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