



Sermon Video Transcript

Cultural warning: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are advised that the following video contains images, names, and quotes of people who are deceased.

Safina Stewart: Wuthathi and Mabuiag Island woman, Common Grace's Storyteller and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Lead.

Welcome, and thank you for joining us on Aboriginal Sunday 2026. Today we come together as the Australian church to reflect on our journey alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, a journey filled with pain, hope, and a call to courage. Walking in justice means listening deeply and standing faithfully when the road does get difficult. It means humbly committing ourselves to learn, to lament, and to act. Our faith in Jesus calls us beyond words to action, solidarity, and to love, walking side by side with Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander communities, seeking healing and reconciliation. So today, we will share stories from the past and voices from the present, inspiring us to be strong and courageous as God calls us to be.

Adam Gowen: *Wiradjuri man, and Deputy Chair of the Common Grace Board.*

Let's remember the history of Aboriginal Sunday. On the 26th of January, 1938, Aboriginal leaders gathered on Gadigal land in Sydney, including William Cooper, Jack Patten, William Ferguson, Pastor Sir Doug Nicholls, Aunty Pearl Gibbs, and Aunty Margaret Tucker to declare a national Day of Mourning. Rather than celebrating, they mourned 150 years of dispossession, discrimination, and deep pain. This was courageous and prophetic. Following this, William Cooper called on Australian churches to pray and act in solidarity with Aboriginal peoples on the Sunday before January 26th. This became Aboriginal Sunday, a day for the Church to stand in truth and justice.

Safina: For Aboriginal Sunday 2026, our theme today is rooted in God's powerful word to Joshua: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9). Joshua faced unknown challenges, but God's presence gave him courage. Today, the Australian Church is called to that same courage as it steps up for justice and healing for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly the children. My question is, how can the Church of Australia practically support reconciliation

and justice this year? Walking with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on a path of justice, healing, and truth-telling requires courage. It means confronting hard realities, children still being taken, deaths in custody, systematic racism, and the long history of denial. We see the ongoing injustices that impact our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Our First Nations communities continue to plead for our children to be loved and not locked up. Yet we've seen in the last 12 months states lowering the age of criminal responsibility from 14 down to 10 years old, reintroducing inhumane treatment of children in detention. Children continue to be subjected to cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment, including solitary confinement, spit hoods, strip searches, and in some cases, being detained in adult facilities. An urgent complaint has been made to the United Nations about Australia's discriminatory youth justice system and how it seriously violates the human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. So what will the church say to all of this? God's promise to be with us remains, and God invites us all to be involved in bringing his just kingdom to the here and now. Together.

Adam: In Hebrews, the Bible tells us we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1). Those who have gone before us in faith and courage. But we are not alone. God goes with us. And we are surrounded by Aboriginal Christian leaders, past and present, who've shown us what courageous faith looks like. Among them are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christian leaders of the past, like William Cooper and Doug Nicholls. Yorta Yorta man, William Cooper, challenged

the Church to pray and act in solidarity with Aboriginal peoples. He was a devout Christian activist and a unionist who was a leading figure in the fight for Aboriginal rights in Australia. He organised the first Aboriginal protest march to the German Consulate in 1938 against Nazi persecution of Jewish people, and for a petition to King George V in the 1930s to seek Aboriginal representation in the Federal Parliament. Along with others, Cooper established the Australian Aborigines League and was part of the 1938 Day of Mourning. He established Aboriginal Sunday, a day for Christians to act in solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This day was eventually moved to July and became NAIDOC Week.

Pastor Sir Doug Nicholls was born on the Cummeragunja Mission. He was the grandnephew of William Cooper and was known for his outstanding leadership in youth and welfare work and through his unfailing efforts to further the cause of justice of Aboriginal people. He was a passionate advocate and a minister who was the co-founder of the Aborigines Advancement League. He was an outstanding Aussie rules footballer and became the first Aboriginal governor of a state. He was the Governor of South Australia in the 1970s.

Safina: And there are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christian leaders who continue to lead and inspire us today. Two senior Aboriginal Christian leaders who have had a great impact on the Common Grace movement are Aunty Jean Phillips and Uncle Ray Minniecon.

Senior Aboriginal Christian leader, Aunty Dr. Jean Phillips was born on the Aboriginal mission of Cherbourg in Queensland. She's ministered for over 65 years, raising up Aboriginal Christian leaders and calling the Church to justice. She's dedicated her life to justice, advocating for and serving Indigenous communities and fostering reconciliation across churches.

Uncle Pastor Dr. Ray Minniecon is a proud Kabi Kabi, Gurang Gurang, and Ambrym Island Elder. Uncle Ray is the founder of Scarred Tree Ministries at St. John's Anglican Church in Glebe. He's a steadfast voice of faith, justice, and community. He's an advocate for bold climate action and authentic justice for Aboriginal people. Their courage and faith remind us that Christ goes before us, and the spirit strengthens us to walk boldly.

Adam: Now we want to pause and listen closely to the wisdom of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christian leaders and community voices. These are people who carry a deep knowledge, lived experience, and faith. They guide us with strength, courage, and hope. As you hear their words, I invite you to listen with an open heart and an open mind, to receive their message, and to be inspired to walk alongside them in friendship and justice.

Cameron Balcombe: *Olkola and Djabuguy man, Forensic Mental Health Clinician.*

So what does a strong and courageous church community

look like to me? For me it means sticking by our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander brothers and sisters, listening to them, uplifting their voices, particularly when we're up against adversity, up against challenges.

Stephanie Evans: *Wiradjuri woman.*

To me, a courageous church is one that stands up for injustice in its community, outside of its community, but also one that walks out our call to love. That we welcome all people through the doors, that all people are welcomed, affirmed, celebrated, and able to join into the community and experience God's love.

Nathan Tyson: *Anaiwon man, Head of First Peoples Strategy & Engagement, Uniting Church Synod of NSW/ACT.*

I think a strong and courageous Church looks like one that will acknowledge wrong, and that will admit mistakes, and that will work hard to fix those things and to move forward in a positive way. I think a strong and courageous Church will remember that it's our job to love and not to judge, that it's our job to remember to care for those on the margins, that it's our job to act with grace and compassion and care for those who need it. I think sometimes we forget what our mission is. Our mission is to serve in God's mission, so we need to always be grounded in love and in our faith.

Aunty Shirli Congoo: *Kabi Kabi and South Sea Islander woman, The Salvation Army's General Manager - National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Team.*

A strong and courageous Church, to me, looks like a church and its people willing to leave the church and go into community to where our people are so that we're able to not represent, but re-present Jesus in our local communities.

Aunty Donna Meehan: *Gamilaroi woman, Chaplain, International Author and Broadcaster.*

I think of Hebrews 10:19, and it says that “the blood of Jesus gives us courage to enter the holy place”. And so we look at Jesus, he was courageous. You know, we need to be courageous. You know, these times, we need to be courageous people stepping out of our comfort zone and addressing the needs that we see in each of our communities.

Adam: I think, if the Church can be a place of welcome, a place that is, or a community that really is supportive of people, and strong in both opening our arms and walking alongside people who are hurting. That's true strength.

Cameron: Isaiah calls us, "Learn to do right. Seek justice. Defend the oppressed" (Isaiah 1:17). At Common Grace, we long for a nation where all children can flourish, free from harm and fear, surrounded by communities that nurture healing and growth. A nation where the youth justice system respects dignity, culture, and hope. That vision, however, is far from our current reality. Instead, we see a system and a public debate steeped in fear, punishment, and political point scoring. We hear narratives fueled by outrage and urgency and the illusion that incarceration equals justice. And it is

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who suffer the greatest harm. In Australia, children as young as 10 can be held criminally responsible. This means that a school student in Grade 3 or 4 can be arrested, strip searched, and placed in detention. First Nations children are 27 times more likely to be in detention than their non-Indigenous peers.

But what if the Church could offer a different story of youth justice, a story that acknowledges accountability and supports victims, yet also speaks of healing, dignity, and restoration? A story that refuses to give up on any child.

This Aboriginal Sunday, we invite the Australian Church to courageously step into this story and to call on the Australian Federal Government to step up and step into reforming the youth justice system. We need a system that is evidence-based, trauma-informed, and seeks to bring accountability, safety, and healing. A system where children are loved, not locked up, and where our leaders act with courage and compassion to make it so.

Safina: A courageous Church listens deeply, laments injustice, advocates for change, and builds genuine relationships based on respect and reciprocity. So on this Aboriginal Sunday, we are called once more to be strong and courageous. To walk boldly in faith and justice, to step into advocating for Aboriginal youth. Let us commit to listening, learning, and standing together with First Nations communities. Let us be a Church that acknowledges the past, works hard in the present, and walks courageously into a future of healing and

hope. Side-by-side. “Be strong and courageous, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:9)

Thank you for walking with us.