



Justice and Advocacy Week: First Nations Devotion

‘The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance’: Naboth and the dispossession of Indigenous People

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In the book of *1 Kings*, chapter 21, we read about a Jezrealite named Naboth who farmed a fruitful vineyard on his ‘ancestral inheritance’, that is, on land that was given to his family by God. Unfortunately, his next door neighbor was Ahab, the king of Israel, who maintained a military fortress in Jezreel. Ahab coveted Naboth’s vineyard and sought to persuade him to part with it in exchange for another vineyard or else for a large sum of money. But Naboth refused, saying:

The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance. (21.3)

Allow me to translate what Naboth was saying into a more modern idiom: ‘Even if I wanted to, I could not part with this land. It is the inheritance of my family from the Lord, and I have a responsibility to care for it in perpetuity’. Well, Ahab was not well pleased. At first he sulks, much like a small boy who is forbidden what he wants. But then Ahab’s wife, Jezebel, taking the role of an indulgent mother, sets about claiming Naboth’s land through various forms of legal subterfuge. False witnesses are summoned to testify against Naboth, claiming that he had publicly cursed both God and the king, two crimes (blasphemy and treason) arguably punishable by death in Israel. Naboth is summarily executed by stoning on Ahab’s orders, and his land seized by the crown. Now, should there be any doubt in the mind of the reader about the righteousness or otherwise of what Ahab has done, the narrator finishes the story by telling us that Elijah the Tishbite, amongst the greatest of Israel’s prophets, is sent by God to confront the royals concerning their crime.

I recall this story because it reminds me of the pattern of acquisition habitually used by colonists to annex Indigenous territories. Here on the lands of the Kulin nations in Naarm (Melbourne), for example, capitalist investors from England – some of whom, like John Batman, already had substantial assets in lutrawita (Tasmania) – heard reports of rich country suitable for sheep and cattle farming in the area they called, at the time, Port Phillip. Knowing that those lands were already occupied by Aboriginal clans, they tried to acquire the land through trade: the land for a few European trinkets of extremely limited value. But the Kulin elders would not trade their lands. For them, the land could not be sold or in any way disposed of, because it was given them by their creator ancestors, and they therefore had a responsibility to care for it in perpetuity. Instead, they generously allowed the new arrivals to pass through their lands, taking only what they needed for their own sustenance.

But the colonists were not satisfied with this arrangement. They wanted the land for themselves, so they employed large teams of former soldiers and convicts to ‘clear’ that country of its Indigenous owners. In the bloody conflicts of the next twenty years, now called the ‘Frontier Wars’, many thousands of native peoples died. Subsequent Colonial Office reports justified the killings as a



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necessary and proportional response to the ‘wickedness’ of Aboriginal aggression.¹ But the truth of the matter has never been fully faced by either British or Australian governments. The land was simply stolen, and its owners murdered or permanently displaced. All for the sake of making a few million pounds out of sheep and cattle farming.

The result of this sordid history could not be more stark. The families of those investors who annexed Kulin territory are still amongst the wealthiest in the British Commonwealth. The land they acquired at the point of a gun was either farmed or sold on to new waves of white settlers. New colonial governments simply claimed the remaining territories for the crown. But the few Kulin who survived the initial violence were rounded up and placed in missions run by the churches with government money. Later their children were taken away from the missions and placed in white households, where they worked as slaves. Their descendants are today the most disadvantaged members of Victoria society, on any measure.

Still, the Kulin have found their voices once more and have started out on the long pilgrimage to reclaim what is theirs by way of history, culture and family. Perhaps the churches who participated in their dispossession might now become allies in the quest for justice?

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Reflection Questions:

1. Think about where your church community currently gathers. What do you know about the First Nations Peoples on whose land you meet on? If you don’t know, what might you do to find out?
2. How might you personally, and corporally as a church, begin to acknowledge and lament the dispossession of land, loss of culture and family in which our First Nations Peoples have experienced?
3. What steps might you and your church take to start walking alongside First Nations Peoples on their quest for justice?

¹ For more on the violence at the heart of the founding of Melbourne, the reader is encouraged to look at James Boyce, *1835: the founding of Melbourne and the conquest of Australia* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2013).