

## “The people who lived in darkness have seen a great light.”

Bible reference: ISAIAH 9:1-4

*But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.*

In my parish in Sydney, we used to do Australian stories on this day. We'd print and share some stories of people in the parish. They were wonderful stories of mainly European, North American, Asian backgrounds coming to make a wonderful difference to our land)

Very different stories to those in my previous parish in Alice Springs.

I was reminded of this recently when I looked again at this book “Every hill got a story” book cover.

Our stories are important and part of the story of Christianity, of the Spirit of God at work in this land is the story of those who brought the gospel here in the first place. They include our Lutheran European stories and now wonderful stories of so many different backgrounds.

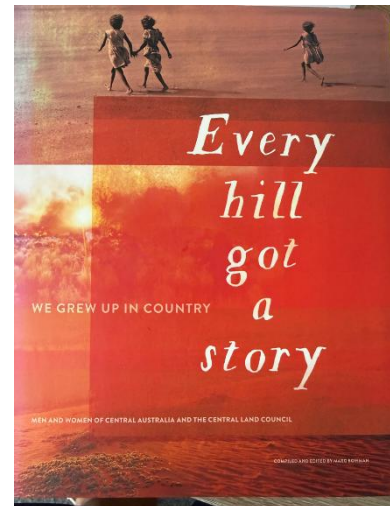
An important part of the story of the Spirit at work is the story of the first peoples of this nation. Some of the German European ancestors brought the good news of Jesus purposely in a mission of love to the first peoples.

I'm going to share a story of two people of sure faith who made a huge difference of faith and love in their witness to me and to others.

They are people who knew the reality of the words of Matthew 4: “People living in darkness have seen a great light”. They are people of faith who made a difference.

But to hear their stories we must also tell stories which are hard to hear... hard stories of great injustice and inequality of darkness perpetrated by the new arrivals and normalized; and lives, generations of lives of first people affected. and of Christian leaders calling the nation and the church to attention to this darkness.

Today we remember and are called into this story too to bring the light of Christ to our nation at this time where we are.



In 1938, Aboriginal Christian Leader William Cooper courageously called upon Australian churches to set aside the Sunday before January 26 to stand in solidarity and pray for justice and flourishing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Cooper was a proud Yorta Yorta man. He helped establish the Australian Aborigines League and played a central role in the 1938 Day of Mourning. Cooper also organised the first Aboriginal protest march to the German consulate in response to the Nazi persecution of Jewish people. His vision for “Aboriginal Sunday” created space for churches to stand with Aboriginal peoples - a legacy that eventually grew into NAIDOC Week.

The Australian Churches were asked to set aside the Sunday before January 26 as Aboriginal Sunday, a day for Christians to act in solidarity and prayer for justice and the flourishing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

So today we will pray for all Australians whatever our backgrounds, languages, beliefs, and stories. But we will especially pray for first Australians. As we hear the story of the Christ light shining in the darkness, so we are invited into the story and to be the story in our lives in this land.

#### Story One: Doug Abbott

Doug Abbott was a proud Western Arrente man. Born in the 1940's, Doug's father was a stockman working on cattle stations in the vicinity of Alice Springs. The family were Lutheran Christians having received the gospel in the Hermannsburg area. Doug came



into Alice Springs to go to school. He stayed at the Mission block at Alice Springs Lutheran Church and were cared for by Aboriginal Pastor Eli Rabuntja. “There was no racism at school he says. We played as kids played, good friends, honest.”

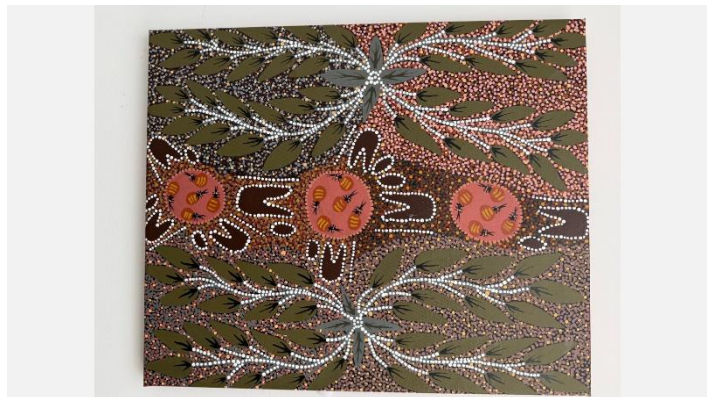
After 5 years of school at the age of 15 Doug followed his dream to become a stockman like his dad and trained to become a mechanic. Later Doug and his wife, Lana, both people of strong faith wanted to help their people. They saw the plight of what alcohol was doing to his people. Doug and Lana started a quiet but determined mission to make a difference. And what a difference they made. It took them to Canada to see a program created by indigenous people for indigenous people with alcohol and petrol sniffing abuse.

Doug and Lana brought the program back to Central Australia. Doug said, “a lot of people thought we were on a wild goose chase”. And I said “No, I want to look where indigenous people are doing something for themselves, not white man’s idea”. So, we went and brought the program back. This was the beginning of the Central Australian Aboriginal Alcohol Programs Unit (CAAPU) which as a new freshly minted pastor with no idea, I thanked God for in the faith and witness of two amazing Lutheran Christians, Doug and Lana.

They also were instrumental in partnering with us in the Alice Springs congregation to form a safe place for youth to be and to be cared for and to connect at a time of a spate of youth suicides. I was pastor at Lana’s funeral in my last year in Alice Springs.

### Story 2: Christobel Swan and the Swan family

One of the very first families I met on my first Sunday in Alice Springs congregation was the Swan family. These were beautiful Southern Arrente people, humble, quiet but oh so caring, faithful and wise Lutheran Christians in Central Australia.



They came to faith growing up on and around Henbury Station a couple of hundred kilometres to the south of Alice Springs. Christobel is the family member I will tell the story about today. She was quiet, humble, and oh so wise. She was so caring and so faithful to her Lord. A pastoral Assistant in the congregation, Christobel was always one of the first people I turned to for guidance.

Christobel grew up in the era when children were being taken from their families by the Australian government. She was called a half caste Aboriginal person. One day, she says, the police came for her. Strehlow, Pastor Strehlow’s son stood in between them and said “No”. I will take her to Ntaria (Hermannsburg) and put her in school. “Oh I was happy, she says. Because Strehlow saved me”. And from there, Christobel was taken south to South Australia where she did the bulk of her schooling. She held no grudges about this and after returning to Central Australia, she used her education to become an interpreter in the courts for Aboriginal people.

She helped so many. And after her long days and weeks of serving there she and her siblings made their home a safe refuge for so many family members and young people. I will never meet a more wonderful humble Christian than Christobel.

She would take her children and grandchildren to the place of her mother's country, a vital place of women's dreaming and identity and story. there she would teach culture, language and faith. Just inspiring. True light

But one only understands the amazing positive light Christobel is by the dark that also is her story and that of her family.

Christobel writes

Our family before we were living there at Twenge....Terrible things happened. We want to teach our children these stories, so they don't forget where they came from. These stories are the ones that were told to us a long time ago. Christobel goes on to write of atrocities committed against her people which I find too shocking to read here today. She concludes "when we go back to Henbury, to Twenge, we can hear the people singing out. Their spirits are still there."

These are difficult things for us to reconcile with in the peace and safety of where we are in 2026.

But they are part of people's stories today. Other Christians' stories and we should be aware today as we pray.

Christobel Swan is a wonderful, humble, gentle Christian who shaped my life and ministry.

To the people of Central Australia, Christ has come.

2 The people who walked in darkness

have seen a great light;

those who lived in a land of deep darkness—

on them light has shined.

3 You have multiplied exultation.

you have increased its joy;

they rejoice before you

as with joy at the harvest, ISAIAH 9:2-3

To the people of coastal Australia and every part of this continent, Christ comes.

Christ comes to the darkness of human sin and death and the ways of the devil and he defeats them for us by his humble sacrifice of love on the cross.

And this shapes us for life.

Our Call this Australia Day, this Sunday is to be who we are as Australians, each with unique stories but each of us bearing the light of Christ and the gospel light into our land and especially where injustice tries to have its way. Part of that is to learn of the stories of the many amazing cultures which make up this nation; to lift our eyes to the light beyond our own stories and to ask how can I, how can we make a Christ sized difference in this land.

And for me today, I need look no further than the stories of Doug and Lana and Christobel to see Christ the light for me.

Maybe this Australia Day weekend, this Aboriginal Sunday, there are stories of people for you to learn... maybe its of the people in your home or nearby. Maybe it's in the stories of people far from you and very different from yours.

And in learning and being enriched by others, so you can grow in being who you are, carriers of the light of Christ in your life bringing his life and love to the people and society and places where God calls you.

Your story is important

Your witness in Christ makes a difference and shapes this land.

Be bold and share the light. Amen.

*Video of the service including the above address can be found on the St Paul's Lutheran Church Youtube page <https://www.youtube.com/@stpaulslutheranchurchboxhi1133>*