

Along the track

God's Own Country

How many times have you heard that expression? People from the north of Australia to the South and from East to West, describe their patch as "God's own country". And it is to them. Sadly, we don't always treat it as such.

"God's Own Country" is usually a phrase meaning an area, region or place is supposedly favoured by God. In recent times it has been used by the state of Kerala in India with great success as its tourism logo. Apart from a way to describe the beauty of the region, it also includes how the variety of faiths in the state have coexisted harmoniously for centuries, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Jews, and Parsis (Zoroastrians). The number of temples, churches, towers, spires and synagogues are testimony to that. I wonder is that what we mean when we call our patch God's own country?

In England "God's own country" for many refers to the legend that, as a boy Jesus visited England with his great uncle, Joseph of Arimathea. The supposed event itself inspired the William Blakes poem:

*And did those feet in ancient time,
Walk upon England's mountains green:
And was the holy Lamb of God,
On England's pleasant pastures seen!*

*And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?*

In the most common interpretation of the poem, Blake asks whether a visit by Jesus briefly created heaven in England, in contrast to the "dark Satanic Mills" of the Industrial Revolution. It has become, many suggest, the unofficial national anthem of Britain. How could Jesus possibly have not visited such a beautiful place and such wonderful people. So when we say 'this is God's country', do we mean that the Holy Lamb of God is present in this place? That's up to us, I guess.

In Australia, the phrase "God's own country" appears to have gradually fallen out of favour but it is still used at times. In New Zealand, in recent times, God's own country has changed to Godzone.

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, the meaning of Country is more than just ownership or connection to land, as Professor Mick Dodson explains:

For us, Country is a word for all the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that area and its features. It describes the entirety of our ancestral domains. While they may all no longer necessarily be the title-holders to land, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are still connected to the Country of their ancestors and most consider themselves the custodians or caretakers of their land.

Is that what we mean by God's country – God's presence in our history, in the beauty of our land and the freedom it offers and our obligation to country? One of the most inspiring speeches I have read is Saint Pope John Paul's address to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Alice Springs. In part he said:

As the human family spread over the face of the earth, your people settled and lived in this big country that stood apart from all the others... But for thousands of years you have lived in this land and fashioned a culture that endures to this day. And during all this time, the Spirit of God has been with you. Your "Dreaming", which influences your lives so strongly that, no matter what happens, you remain for ever people of your culture, is your only way of touching the mystery of God's Spirit in you and in creation.

For thousands of years this culture of yours was free to grow without interference by people from other places. You lived your lives in spiritual closeness to the land, with its animals, birds, fishes, waterholes, rivers, hills and mountains. Through your closeness to the land you touched the sacredness of man's relationship with God, for the land was the proof of a power in life greater than yourselves. You did not spoil the land, use it up, exhaust it. and then walk away from it. You realized that your land was related to the source of life.

So what do we mean when we call our area God's own country? That God loves us more than others? That God loves all of us in our richness and diversity? That country has a special meaning to all of us, those of us who came tens of thousands of years ago to those of us who have arrived in very recent times? That country has a deeper meaning than just a resource to be exploited.

Regards
Jim Quillinan

Email: jquillinan@dcsi.net.au