



## Considering Empire from a Christian perspective

February 2026

<sup>25</sup> Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. <sup>26</sup> Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>27</sup> and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— <sup>28</sup> just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Matthew 20:25-28

*Jesus fought against every kind of oppressive and unjust power in order to promote and defend the life of justice for the poor.* Jon Sobrino, “The True Church and the Poor”, (1981), 174.

*In its early centuries, the church lived in conflict with the Roman Empire, and used the imagery of conflict to explain the saving power of the cross.* Walter Wink, “The Powers that be”, (1998), 89.

*To say, as the liberationists do, that “God has a preferential option for the poor” is to suggest a Theology that is bound to be threatening to the rich and powerful.*

Douglas John Hall, “The Cross in Our Context”, (2003), 80.

The 2025 Synod meeting adopted Faithful Futures (resolution 25.3.14.1) as a strategic direction forward for the church. Included in the Faithful Futures resolution is:

**Respecting Country:** Honouring the Church’s Covenant with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, all communities of faith will listen to and be able to tell about some of the histories of the Country on which they are located by the end of 2028, and be invited to develop local and appropriate ways to respond.

As background to the Respecting Country work, the following sheet provides information on the British Empire at the time of the conquest of Australia. A key reason for doing so is that, as Christians, we need to seek a society and world that looks to the well-being of all people. We need to reject the political systems of empire that use lethal violence for the accumulation of wealth, power and privilege for the few. Empires extended well beyond those of Western European kingdoms, including the Persian and Ottoman Empires and empires in what are modern-day India, Mexico and China, to name a few examples. We should seek the correction of historical injustices to assist people who were conquered in addressing the intergenerational trauma they have been subjected to. In responding to Respecting Country, there is an opportunity to focus on our need to reject empire as a system of government.

A second reason for the sheet is to encourage the approach to Respecting Country, not being about guilt and shame for those alive today. No one alive today took part in the colonisation of Australia, so no one alive today is guilty of what happened. However, those of us who are not First People are unwitting beneficiaries of the colonial conquest of Australia. Even for those who are descendants of the early settlers in Australia, the vast majority are unlikely to be descendants of the wealthy minority who were the main beneficiaries of the conquest at the time. Scholar Liam Kofi Bright, in his 2023 paper *White Psychodrama*, argued that “white” people having arguments over whether they should feel guilty about the racist colonial past does not in itself address the ongoing injustices experienced by the descendants of those who were colonised. Instead, it acts as a barrier to those who might otherwise support action to correct historical injustices. Our discussion should be about how we work together towards a world where First Peoples can obtain justice for past wrongs.

Jesus lived under the shadow of an exploitive and brutal empire. It has been estimated that the wealthiest 1.5% of the ruling group in the Roman Empire owned 20% of the wealth. Jesus made it very clear that the rule or Kingdom of God is not one modelled on exploitive human empires. Those who strive to be faithful must not seek to accumulate wealth and power for themselves (Mark 9:35; Luke 16:19-31; Mt 19:16-30).

### The British Empire at the time of the conquest of Tasmania and Victoria

England, at the time of the conquest of Tasmania and Victoria, was not a democracy as we understand it. Voting for the British Parliament was restricted to men of a certain level of wealth. A Reform Act passed in 1832 increased the number of wealthy men who could vote from 400,000 (10%) to 653,000 (16%).<sup>1</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> Gal Beckerman, “*The Quiet Before*”, Bantam Press, 2022, 37.

arrangement restricting representation in government to the wealthy was carried over into Australia. For example, the governance of Tasmania (Van Diemen's Land according to the British colonial authorities) was established through the *Australian Colonies Government Act 1850*. As late as 1881, voting for the Tasmanian Legislative Assembly was restricted to the wealthiest 50% of men, and voting in the Legislative Council was restricted to the wealthiest 10% of men.<sup>2</sup>

People who campaigned for democratic reforms were often subjected to persecution, including imprisonment and transportation to penal colonies. Among the convicts that were transported to Australia were pro-democracy political prisoners. Of the approximate 162,000 convicts sent to Australia between 1788 and 1868, there were between 3,600 and 4,000 political prisoners.<sup>3</sup> They included trade unionists and Irish revolutionaries, such as the Tolpuddle Martyrs. The Tolpuddle Martyrs were six agricultural labourers from Dorset who were convicted in 1834 for swearing an oath to the Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers during a labour dispute over wage cuts that reduced their income to near-starvation levels.<sup>4</sup> The number of political prisoners that arrived in Australia does not include those who were killed during transportation to Australia. For example, in 1799, of 320 Irish political prisoners sent to Australia on the *Atlas* and *Hercules*, 127 were starved to death, and the survivors arrived at Botany Bay emancipated.<sup>5</sup>

### **Brutality of the British Empire in places other than Australia**

The British Empire was harsh even on many of its own citizens. In addition to suppressing people campaigning for democracy and worker rights, it was reckless with the lives of the soldiers sent to expand the empire. For example, 60% of British troops sent to what is modern-day Haiti from 1793 to 1798 died there, almost all from disease. The deaths were in the thousands. They were sent there to take Haiti from the French and to restore slavery, which the French Revolutionaries had abolished. The death rate amongst the troops was as high as 10% a month.<sup>6</sup> The soldiers were almost exclusively drawn from people in poverty, either pressed into service or having no other options to obtain an income.

Ruthless oppression to maintain the empire was not just inflicted on those people outside of Europe. For example, in 1798, around 30,000 people in Ireland were slaughtered in a matter of weeks after a failed revolt against the British Empire.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary with the conquest of Australia was also the Great Famine in Ireland from 1845 to 1849. Late blight destroyed the potato crop, resulting in famine. However, the effects of the famine were exacerbated by the farm structure imposed by the colonial British authorities and the British Government's inadequate response to provide famine relief. Members of the British ruling class publicly proclaimed that the crisis was a predictable result of high birth rates and flaws in the Irish national character, with the famine a welcome corrective action. Approximately one million people died from starvation and famine-related diseases.<sup>8</sup>

Outside of Europe, one of the most brutal acts of the British Empire that was contemporary to the conquest of Australia was the crushing of a revolt by Indian troops that were in the service of the British East India Company in 1857 - 1858. The Indian troops committed mass murder of British civilians in India. The response by forces under British control was far more ruthless in crushing the revolt, with an estimated 800,000 Indians murdered, mainly civilians, including through famines inflicted by British forces.<sup>9</sup> British historian William Dalrymple described it as "probably the bloodiest episode in the entire history of British colonialism."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> James Boyce, *Van Diemen's Land*, Black Inc, 2008, 241.

<sup>3</sup> Nick Baker and Ian Coombe, *The forgotten political history of Australia's convicts*, ABC Radio National, 30 March 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Gal Beckerman, *The Quiet Before*, Bantam Press, 2022, 37-38.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty*, Phoenix, 1969, 349-350.

<sup>6</sup> Geggus, D.P., *Slavery, War, and Revolution. The British Occupation of Saint Domingue, 1793-1798*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, Oxford University Press, 1989, 258; and Thomas Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty*, Phoenix, 1969, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Joel Mokyr, "Great Famine", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 29 December 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Ian Barrow, *The East India Company, 1600-1858*. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2017, 115.

<sup>10</sup> William Dalrymple, *The Anarchy. The relentless rise of the East Indian Company*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019, 391.