

**Epiphany 6B, 15<sup>th</sup> February, 2009**

**2 Kings 5:1-14; Ps 30; 1 Cor 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45**

***Life Goes On***

***Rev Robyn Boyd***

“It's good to drink and talk and cry, and that's been happening a bit, but it's still too soon. People desperately want it to not be too soon, but it is. That dawn will come, but not yet.....”

Quite a few up the hill have raised Australian flags. Maybe on a piece of steel or a bit of fence or the chimney, something useless now that is all that remains of their previous life. None are at half-mast, not one. Despite everything.” (The Age, Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> February)

The fires are still burning, thankfully with less intensity, and lives and properties under reduced threat. But have you noticed how the emphasis in the media has begun to shift? Early stories of the impossible intensity of the fires moved to stories of tragic loss of lives, then to stories of the incredible courage of the fire-fighters, to stories of survival. And now to future prevention, and even to systematic blame and class action compensation claims.

It's not quite business as usual. Not yet. But it's moving that way. The flags are raised at full mast. Life goes on. The question begins to move from the complex “why?” to “how?”. How can life go on? For the people who have lost loved ones, homes, livelihood, life as it was, has ceased to be. There will never be any going on with life as it was. New homes will be built, communities will rebuild –perhaps even with stronger bonds of community “glue”. The searing pain of losing family and friends will begin to heal; or at least for some this will mean the raw pain will begin to be tamed to some sort of a bearable numbness, and people will find ways to live with pain that will always lurk in the shadows, within. Some of those ways will be healthy, others sadly unhealthy, like chronic blame and bitterness. But no-one –not even us on the sidelines –can go back to life as it was before.

In the Church, we talk about “pastoral liturgy” – in simpler language, we talk about the way in which we can gather together as God's people, bringing our thoughts, our pain, our confusion to God in the context of a service of worship. We use words, music and symbolism to express our sorrows about a tragedy or event, and to bring before us reminders of God's comfort and his great loving care in the midst of heartbreak and grief. God weeps with us, just as Jesus, deeply moved by the grief of his dear friends, wept beside the tomb of his friend Lazarus. Just as Jesus is stirred by profound compassion at his encounter with the leper in today's Gospel story.

These days we recognise that communities, like individuals, need help to farewell what was, in order to begin the process of rebuilding and re-creating the fabric and essence of community. And we recognise that there are rippling waves of effects that go out beyond those immediately devastated. We have all been in shock. We all have been confronted by the mighty forces of nature against which we are powerless. We are reminded of our helpless vulnerability. Old losses, ones we thought were buried and dealt with, rise up as if beckoned by the losses so palpable in the faces before us in the papers and on the TV.

Some of you were there at the Cathedral on Friday for the service of *Tears, dust, and ashes: a service of prayer, hope, and remembrance* – or like me, you may have listened to it on the radio. With something like that, and with churches all over Melbourne today marking this day as a Day of Remembrance, we are in effect ritually marking the dying of the old, and the turning of our faces to the possibilities of new life. We have begun the shift into *life going on*.

And we come back to that question of “how?”.

In today’s Gospel reading, we see Jesus healing a leper –or more accurately healing someone with a skin disease (probably not leprosy, but let’s stick with the word “leper”). We read: “moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him ‘I do choose. Be made clean’”. The original text makes a much stronger statement- Jesus is profoundly moved with strong emotion – a real gut reaction of deep compassion, tinged with anger. Anger at this man’s condition and how that has meant his being put on the edges of community life, and anger at the forces that caused it; those things that happen in our world that cause innocent suffering.

Jesus stretches out his hand and touches this man. Now, we need to get into the mind-set of first century life to get the full impact of this. Under Levitical Hebrew law lepers had to wear torn clothes, let their hair hang loose and cry “unclean, unclean” when approached. Touching a diseased person violated purity laws and rendered the toucher unclean himself and also put that person on the fringes of the community. Imagine what it would have been like for this man to have someone freely touch him, with great love and without fear. This man’s life would have been one of a constant message that he was unworthy and undeserving of anything good in life.

At Jesus’ touch, life for this man, whose living had been destroyed by leprosy, goes on in a completely different way than before – to a future of physical and social restoration and healing.

Well, we might say –that’s fine for a leper and Jesus two thousand years ago. But here and now -how can life go on when lives have been turned to ashes?

If we look deeper, the question isn’t just about the bush fire victims here and now – it’s for all of us, whether our lives have been shattered through fire, or damaged and broken through circumstances outside our control, through people and situations that have put us on the margins of life, like the leper. How can life go on when the

pain of a deeply hidden or untouchable area of our lives smoulders away and darkens our memories, and threatens to make us believe that there is no fullness of life for us, and that we are unworthy of Jesus' healing touch?

In a rather humorous contrast to the gospel story, our Old Testament reading took us to Naaman – Naaman had status, power and wealth on his side when he went seeking Elisha, the prophet of Israel, for his healing from a leprosy-like skin disease. Naaman had no problems in thinking he deserved not only to be grandly and immediately healed, but that he should be received with great honour and grovelling, arrives at Elisha's door with caravans of gifts to proffer for this healing. What he got was no loving touch from the man of God, but an insulting closed door and a lowly servant who passed on the message that he was to go and bathe himself in a skanky river. After a great sulking protest, he eventually took himself off to the dirty waters of the Jordan, and was healed.

What might we hear from these two stories, side by side, about how life can go on? It's not about what we think we are, or what we think we have to offer, or what we think we deserve: God's touch –the extension of his love and mercy and healing towards us - is because of **who God is**, and his touch is extended in the same measure to the famous and the lowly, to the outcast and to the in-crowd, to the ones whose lives have been innocently burnt up and -this will shock and horror you - to the ones who may have lit the fires. When you think about that –once you get past the natural feeling that we want to lynch them for the mass murder they have truly committed - they need healing and lives turned around more than any of us. (That doesn't mean they escape their responsibility and God's justice and judgement. )

Today, here at Ascension, as it's so happened, we hold in remembrance those who have suffered in the fires, and we hold up the pastoral care work of our parish. In those who offer pastoral care, we see God's hand stretched out, we see and experience Jesus touching us through them. Not with any judgement or opinions about our needs and the causes of our pain and distress, but simply touching into people's needs because they are in need.

Life will go on. Not easily. How? For those in the bush fires, there will be restoration through the grace and love of Jesus revealed through the fire-fighters, the police, the relief workers, the medical teams, and all those involved in the recovery and rebuilding of people's lives, whether they know Jesus or not. As Christians, we recognise that behind the heroism and tenacity of the human spirit, is the Holy Spirit of God, breathing life in all its potential.

And for all of us who struggle with the destroying fires and leprosy of our lives, there is the quiet healing work of Christ, directly and through those who pastorally care, who touch others with the grace and love of Jesus, who motivates them, empowers them and works through them. Through the touch of Jesus is ushered in a fullness of life that goes beyond skin-deep cleansing and restoration, a life where we ourselves might come and kneel before Jesus and say in humble faith "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean". And so, having been touched by Jesus himself, go out to proclaim the good news of the love of Christ.