

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost: 17 November 2019

Homily

May my words be in the name of God, always creating, redeeming, sanctifying. Amen.

I want to talk about suffering.

In almost every spiritual setting around the world, suffering is identified as one of the human conditions. Each of those spiritualities is working with our suffering to bring us to fullness and hope.

There are many kinds of suffering which are triggered by different things; whether we suffer from ill health and pain; maybe we have tied our dignity to a position we have held for many years and can now no longer fulfil; maybe we don't live up to what society tells us we should be doing, or not doing. Maybe we're in grief for the loss of a loved one, or an unfulfilled promise.

Right now, Australia as a whole country is suffering.

The fires that have swept through NSW and QLD (as well as WA) these past weeks and months have left sorrow in their path. People's lives, homes and livelihoods have perished. The grief is so much, the fear so overwhelming that those of us who feel powerless to help have begun to shout at one another, rather than listen to each other. That grief and fear is manifesting as anger in our socio-political landscape, while our natural landscape, the flora and fauna burn.

It was not so different in Luke's times.

He writes his version of the Gospel sometime between the years 70-90 CE. Each of the gospels have a little apocalyptic speech made by Jesus which leads us to think that he did have something to say along these lines. However, the account we have here was written in retrospect, after the sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple; after the insurrections, the wars. Famine often lies in the wake of wars which ravage the earth; and Israel was no stranger to earthquakes as it is on a major fault line between two tectonic plates. If the ancient cities and towns were not destroyed by invading forces, they collapsed in massive earthquakes. All of the signs mentioned here were totally predicable given where they lived, the political climate, and our human condition. Some have said that the signs leading to our unprecedented fires made them predictable as well.

The way Luke writes Jesus' pronouncement of the destruction of the temple (and Jerusalem later in the chapter), and of the signs and persecutions, the suffering of the people, the way it is written is quite matter of fact. It is easy to read it that way. But I question that. I question whether Jesus was able to look upon the temple and predict its destruction with little emotion.

In chapter 2 Luke tells us that as a boy Jesus stayed behind when his family left for Nazareth because he needed to be in the house of his father. In chapter 19 after his entry into Jerusalem Jesus

cleanses the temple of its “thieves and robbers,” reinstating it as a place of prayer. The temple is where Jesus spent much time joining in the festivals and teaching. He knew the spiritual suffering it would have caused his fellow Jews to no longer have a temple. When he looks upon the people surrounding him and tells them that there will be earthquakes, wars, and famine, I don’t believe he could have seen their faces and not hurt with them for their future suffering. He is the king of compassion!

Compassion: to suffer with.

If you have compassion for somebody, you have entered into their suffering with them. When suffering is shared, it is not so burdensome. The gospels tell us that the compassion Jesus felt often spurred him to action. Jesus is always there in our suffering with us, but sometimes we forget and need to be reminded by seeing Jesus in the faces of our friends and often strangers. In this reading Jesus does not leave the people around him (nor us) comfortless.

Jesus was grounded in scripture and knew well the promises made in Isaiah, read this morning, of a new heaven and new earth, a new Jerusalem! That is the hope of the faith and it is in the hands of God. We know well the paradox of God’s kingdom which is both now and not yet. Let’s be part of the kingdom now. Let’s rely on God to use us to bring compassion to the suffering. To look at creation through the lens of the Gospel and tread lightly and carefully, noticing as we go what care is required.

Today a number of our children, our brothers and sisters in Christ, are taking their first communion. We come to God’s table each week and are nourished by the sacrament. A sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible truth. When we come to the altar and take the body and blood of Christ into ourselves it is the visible sign of the invisible truth that Christ already resides within us. We are already part of the new creation because we are temples of God, part of the New Jerusalem. We ARE hope, by our very existence. We offer hope to one another when we come together to worship, when we join together in social settings, when we carry on with the mundane tasks of life.

Our bushfire emergency is giving Australia an opportunity to build our muscles of compassion. You sometimes hear of compassion fatigue. I think that comes when there is a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. But we are neither helpless nor hopeless. So, lets lean into the suffering and breathe the love of God into the pain that Australia is feeling now and be spurred to what action we are capable of.

While fire is devastating, it is also cleansing. The bush will regrow, the communities will heal with time and they will heal with smoother scars if held in with compassion now and into the future.

Amen.