

Sermon 20 March 2011

Lent 2: after Japanese Earthquake and Tsunami

Genesis 12: 1-4a, John 3: 1-17

Last Sunday, I said nothing about Japan: shocked, I suppose; without words. All I could do was put out a bowl to receive offerings.

Floods

Fires

Earthquakes

Tsunamis

It's all very overwhelming. And this week — Jacky Clark, Mel and David's daughter-in-law died after an operation; she was in her 20's.

Where is God in it all??

For me, God is the one who weeps, powerless.

God is the one who offers a generator to power mobile phones in Japan, who shares precious water with others, who mourns the dead, who stands with the shocked, the injured, the carers, the rescue workers who organise logistics.

Powerless in some respects. God holds the dead, as the living, in love. God is the one who suffers with us.

The earth is dynamic, alive: earthquakes, floods, fires are expected in these parts of the world. But, boy! there has been a lot going on lately.

I feel powerless and overwhelmed.

At this stage all I can do is pray; stay connected with those in the midst of trauma, and stay connected with God.

And I can send financial support to Queensland, Victoria, New Zealand and Japan.

I can weep, I can pray and I can continue to make life-giving choices, knowing life is precious and vulnerable and resilient. As I write, a four month old baby is rescued from the rubble, an elderly couple from a stranded car, and more and more dead are found in Japan. And Australians get out, if they can and come home. You can read Nikolai and Bishop Stuart's reflections in the weekly bulletin.

John V Taylor writes:

Some months ago I was asked by a friend to visit a young couple whose two-year old daughter had been found dead in her cot. They were still stunned and haunted by the old question, Why?; and sometimes, Why her? I simply could not offer them the conventional reassurance about it all being in God's providence, a mystery now but one day to be seen as part of a loving plan. I know that many good souls derive lasting comfort from such counsel, and it certainly squares with a good deal in the Bible, and is to be found in many books of devotion and pastoral practice. but to me it has become unconvincing and strained and suggests a picture of God I find impossible to love, arrogant though that sounds. I said to them instead that their child's death was a tragic accident, an unforeseeable failure in the functioning of the

little body; that, so far from being willed or planned by God, it was for him a disaster and a frustration of his will for life and fulfilment, just as it was for them; that God shared their pain and loss and was with them in it. I went on to say that God is not a potentate ordering this or that to happen, but that the world is full of chance and accident and God has let it be so because that is the only sort of world in which freedom, development, responsibility and love could come into being, but that God was committed to this kind of world in love and to each person in it, and was with them in this tragedy, giving himself to them in fortitude and healing and faith to help them through. And their child was held in that same caring, suffering love.

Such an approach to the problem lays a greater responsibility on us as human beings, and this is in keeping with the gospel.

(Weep not for me — Meditations on the Cross and Resurrection, John V Taylor)

And still each of us makes choices — trusting, risking or playing it safe. Abram and Sarai (in the Genesis reading) have no children in a culture where this is seen as a sign of God's disfavour. Yet God promises them that they will be parents of a great nation.

Abram and Sarai are receiving a bold blessing — God will give them a multitude of descendents and bless them, so that all nations will be blessed. God's gifts are given for the sake of the world. How does that stack up in the midst of disaster where one is taken and another is left?

Why were Abram and Sarai chosen? We don't know. But we do know their response.

There are lots of unknowns for them. Where is this country? What will the journey entail? They could have refused, but they don't. They say 'yes' to God; to Life.

They choose to step out into the unknown, bringing with them a great retinue — relatives, servants, possessions, camels — a caravan beginning a long journey. How the rest of the family felt we don't know, but Abram and Sarai were confident enough in God's call to begin the journey — a journey of trust.

Last Sunday, 20 people from this parish began a retreat in daily life. A retreat which lasts for the whole of Lent. They began in the desert wilderness — praying. Bringing all of their lives to prayer.

“What makes the desert beautiful”, said the little prince, ‘is that somewhere it hides a well...’ (Antoine de St Exupéry, ‘The Little Prince’)

Those participating in the Retreat in Daily Life are also setting out in faith; stepping into the unknown — trusting — like Abram and Sarai, like ‘Lucy’ (referring to a character in ‘The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe’ which is being featured in worship during Lent) that they do not walk alone. God is with them. They meet with a spiritual director/companion weekly. They walk with others, like on the Labyrinth; sometimes they appear to be walking in the same direction, sometimes the opposite, but all have the same goal; deepening relationship with God in the midst of the everyday.

Our faith journey by its nature requires risk and trust; taking a step, one step at a time, sometimes small, sometimes large; trusting the God of Jesus, the God who is Love.

Abram and Sarai's journey would take them around the fertile crescent along the Euphrates River and down into the land of Canaan from the north. It was a journey of

about 400km. Even more important, it was the start of a spiritual journey into a relationship with the God who creates and redeems (Seasons of the Spirit p38).

In a later story, they will be given new names — Abraham and Sarah — as a sign that God has established a covenant with them; a solemn and binding agreement.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam all have their origins in Abraham and Sarah's story — a story that is not finished. It continues with us.

Nicodemus also steps outside his comfort zone. He comes at night to talk with Jesus — under cover of darkness — symbolic of where he is at — secret, unseen.

This late night yarn is challenging and inspiring. Nicodemus hears that new life — the opportunity of a fresh start — is a gift from God; not attained by our efforts. We are called to believe and trust (Seasons of the Spirit, Congregational Life p38)

Our faith ancestors responded to God's call to venture into the unknown, setting out boldly with confidence in God's blessing.

They were able to do this because of their growing relationship with God. God who lives and cares.

Douglas John Hall (*Seasons of the Spirit, Congregational Life*, p.41) says:

God does not give us the Truth, yet God lets the Truth live among us, incarnate; lets us glimpse enough of God's living Truth that we may learn the courage to live despite our real vulnerability, impermanence and littleness. Certitude is denied; confidence is made possible. Consider that word: confidence. Literally, in Latin, it means living with [con] faith [fide]. (*From Bound and Free: A Theologian's Journey*, by Douglas John Hall, © 2005, Augsburg Fortress)

When have you moved forward without certitude but with confidence? What was the result?

Step by step; in faith; in the middle of all that is happening in the world and our lives this week.

Again, John Taylor reflects:

What we are witnessing as we stand before the crucified Christ is not a death but life — life so vividly and intensely alive that it meets death and goes down into nothingness and contains both death and annihilation, taking them in its stride. Death is swallowed up.

Think, if you like, of the aliveness of Jesus as faith. We have dwelt so much on the necessity of our putting our faith in Christ that we lose sight of the prior importance of the faith he put in God and in human beings. So when the darkness of that Friday afternoon offered no assurance of any future and all evidence of a loving God had been taken away, Jesus entrusted himself to hands that had apparently been an illusion. He who cried "why forsaken?" throws himself into that emptiness, throws himself towards that terrifying absence, calling Father! — saying in effect "I will have it that you are there. I will believe in your love. Let there be God." that naked faith of love is pure aliveness of spirit. (*Weep not for me — Meditations on the Cross and Resurrection*, John V Taylor)

Lucy saw Aslan; the others didn't and they didn't believe her. At first she gave into them. She saw him again and this time trusted what she knew, and that made all the difference...