

A Christmas Bushfire Lament

*A sermon by Nathan Nettleton, 5 January 2020
preached in response to the Australian Bushfires
Texts: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 147:12-20; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:1-18
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Message

In the face of monumental devastation and suffering, God speaks a word, and the word becomes flesh.

Sermon

Twelve nights ago we gathered here to sing and celebrate
We told stories about a baby
A baby who would save the world
A baby whose birth was greeted by angels
A baby whose birth meant tidings of joy for all people everywhere
We spoke of God-made-flesh
Cute chubby baby flesh

We sang familiar songs
We enjoyed familiar company
We smiled at our over-excited children as we sang about the baby
We drank champagne and ate Christmas cake
God was in heaven and all was well with the world
Or so it seemed

But all was not well with the world
Large sections of our country were on fire
and some of them had been for weeks
But we sang on, regardless
And others partied on
And holidayed on
Wrapped final presents as the kids fell asleep
But the fires continued to grow

“All is calm, all is bright” we sang
“Sleep in heavenly peace”
“Now you here of endless bliss” we sang
“While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love”
“We will live forever more, because of Christmas Day”, we sang
But the flames got higher

These fires are like nothing ever seen before
They have already burnt out more land
than last year’s fires in California, Brazil and Siberia put together
They are so intense that they generate their own weather systems
and the firefighters are bewildered by their unprecedented behaviour
And when we get days of extreme temperatures and high winds
like we did on both Monday and Friday of last week,
what we now officially call catastrophic fire conditions,

all bets are off.

We've all seen pictures of what it left behind
Haunting horrible pictures
Burnt out houses
Burnt out cars
Burnt out fire trucks
Families huddled terrified on the beaches

What child is this who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping?
What child is being evacuated by the navy?
And what child is this?

What can we say?
Who wants to sing of cute babies now?
Who wants to stand up and talk of the Word made flesh?
There are people in the burns wards
with their flesh horribly burned.
At least 25 others didn't escape the flames
and were burnt to death

What do those songs we were singing mean now?
Do the angels' tidings of great joy mean anything in the face of this?
Can we stand amidst the devastation of Mallacoota, Corryong,
Balmoral, Bateman's Bay, and Kangaroo Island,
and speak of the one who is called Emmanuel
God with us?

Or would it sound obscene?
But that's the challenge isn't it?
Because if the Christmas gospel has nothing meaningful to say
in Buxton, Bruthen and Ensay
then it doesn't really have anything meaningful to say at all
Someone once said
- perhaps it was Athol Gill
I can't remember -
that any theology that can't be preached
in the presence of parents grieving over their dead children
isn't worth preaching anywhere else either

But in the midst of the carnage and shock and horror
what can we say?
There are no words
The lovely lines of peace on earth and goodwill to all
sound impossibly trite and hollow

And worse still
we are afraid to even speak the name of God
aren't we?

For inside there is a horrible question
that we dare not face
that we don't know what to do with
It is not just that our faith seems to lack adequate words of comfort
It is that our faith is not sure that God is not to blame

What did our psalm say just a few minutes ago?
Our words of sacred scripture?
God sends the snow and frost and hail
God speaks, the ice melts
God breathes, the waters flow
That's what it said

And if we believe that
If we believe that that is not just poetic hyperbole
but fundamental doctrine
If we believe that God directs the weather
that God speaks and the earth shudders
that God can calm the waves with a word
then can we escape the awful conclusion
that the bushfires are God's doing?

And what did John say in our gospel reading?
All things came into being through him
and without him, not one thing came into being
The bushfires?
Through him?

Those who shake their fists at heaven
and say that either there is no God
or that God is a callous tyrant
have got irrefutable evidence on their side again this week
Perhaps every week
Even if God didn't directly make the bushfires,
even if we recognise that we are reaping what we have sown
with our failures to care for the earth,
doesn't God have to accept responsibility
for creating such a flammable environment?
Or is God somehow exempt from manufacturer's liability questions?

Let us not speak too hastily in defence of God
lest we be guilty of simply trying to prop up our own shaky faith
and silence the doubts and fears that lurk within all of us
Let us allow God to speak for himself

Preachers often feel lost and alone at times like these,
being the ones who have to find words to say
Impossibly daunting too
bearing the responsibility of preaching the gospel

in a week when the news of the world
seems to make a mockery of it
Maybe we preachers should feel like that every week
charged with the responsibility to speak the word of God
to a desperate people
in a world that seems always capable
of proving our every word a lie

As much as I might want to flee the hot winds of fear and uncertainty
that threatens to explode
and incinerate our faith
I have been called to preach the faith of the Church
in season and out of season
and preach it I must
So I cannot hide behind my own advise
to let God speak for himself
because when God speaks for himself
I am one of the ones God has called
to interpret to you the word God speaks

And at times like this
such a responsibility can feel a bit like some of those awful pictures
I can feel a bit like those people
surveying the charred remains of their homes
Here is the gospel
the faith of the Church
Is there anything left?
Anything that can be recovered?
Or has it all been incinerated?

I can't speak to you as one who has the answers
Like you I am looking for signs of hope
amidst the chaos and devastation
But I can and must speak as one called by God
to interpret what God says in the face of all this
So what does God have to say?
What word am I to interpret?

There is a Word from God
And the Word became flesh
The Word became flesh and cast in his lot with us

Why do we call Jesus "the Word"?
We call him the Word because he is what God has to say
What God has to say is made flesh in the Word
All that God has to say is made flesh in the Word
What God has to say in the face of unspeakable suffering
is made flesh in the Word

There are all too many other words spoken about God
Everyone has an opinion
Some will say that God is absent, dead or doesn't care
Some will say that God is all-powerful
that nothing happens except at God's say-so
and that yes, bushfires only happen if God wills them to
Some will say that the fires are God's judgment
Israel Folau said that
words words words
there are no end of words about God
But what does God have to say?
Jesus

God, are you all-powerful?
Jesus
God, do you care?
The Word becomes flesh
God, did you light the bushfires?
The Word becomes flesh
God, where are you?
The Word becomes flesh

Of course there is always a temptation
to try to repackage the Word
to make it say what we wish it would say
We want a messiah who will protect us from every danger
and we can find words about God that will say that
We want a messiah who can turn back the flames before they get us
and we can find stories of Jesus doing things like that
We want a messiah who will ride in triumphant
like the cavalry at the last minute
and vanquish all that would harm us
and bring us singing and weeping tears of joy
to the victory banquet
Our reading from Jeremiah speaks with such words
But if we make the words say whatever we want
we may miss the Word that God speaks altogether
the Word that takes flesh

Because God has spoken a Word
and it hasn't charged in like the cavalry
God has spoken a Word and it did make the world shudder
The Word became flesh
and the world shuddered
and a great inferno of hostility and selfishness and bitterness flared up
and flung itself against the Word
devastating all in its path
killing even children in its rage

roaring, exploding, incinerating
a great wave of darkness
furiously seeking to annihilate the light

And where was God as the flames hit?
Wasn't God right there bearing the brunt of it?
Wasn't God there
shattered and horror struck
and the flames of hostility
crucified his beloved child?

It's impossible for me to speak with any authority
about what it is like to be facing the fires
I haven't been there
I live safely in the middle of a major city
The worst impact on my has been a bit of smoke haze
and some cancelled holiday plans
The rural retreat where we had intended to spend the last week
is now surrounded by fires.
But I wasn't there
What would I know?

Do I have any idea what it would really feel like?
I doubt it
It was bad enough just imagining it
I don't know how I'd cope if it was real
I certainly wouldn't want to be hearing any comfortable cliches
like all things working together for good
or those who've died have gone to a better place

I doubt whether I have any idea what it would really feel like
but I reckon God does
because when we cried out for answers
for explanations
for deliverance
God spoke a Word
and the Word became flesh
as a beloved child
and the child was torn from the Father's arms
by a ruthless inferno of hate
just another of the hundreds and thousands and millions
of unnamed innocent victims
down through the ages

I reckon God knows
And I reckon that as hard as we might find it
to talk about flesh
while the burns wards are full
God is still not afraid to be identified as flesh

fragile flesh
brutalised flesh
even charred and lifeless flesh

Because the promise of Christmas
is not just that the Word became cute and chubby baby flesh
but that the Word became flesh
and cast in his lot with us
hunted flesh
despised flesh
tortured flesh
dead and buried flesh
flesh charred and burned beyond recognition

And although our story of the Word made flesh
does not stop with dead and buried
we will not really understand the rest of the story
if we think of resurrection as just some kind of miracle cure
which means that death is no longer part of Christ's reality
In the book of Revelation we see the vision
of the risen one on the throne
who still looks like one mortally wounded
The risen one is still the crucified one
The rising one is still the being-crucified one
The people who say all crosses must now be empty are wrong
because the risen Christ is still
the suffering and dying Christ
The risen Christ who promised we would meet him
in the least of these desperate and vulnerable ones
can be seen incinerated in his car on Kangaroo Island
The Word became flesh

If you want to see what God has to say in the face of this
go walk among the ruins of East Gippsland
or just turn on your TV
for God is speaking
and the Word has become flesh

Perhaps as we begin to see what God is saying
we will begin to comprehend how blasphemous
so much of what we blithely say about God really is

Perhaps when we hold out our empty hands
to receive the piece of bread we will be offered shortly
we will recognise something of our solidarity
with desperate hungry people
holding out empty hands
for the food aid that is so easily mobilised in Australia
but so hard to access in many of the world's disasters

And perhaps we will see in those images
of people surveying the ashes of their homes
the image of the Father who spoke the Word that becomes flesh
and whose grief and suffering take flesh still
in body and blood
offered for the life of the world
and placed into our empty hands
that we might live
even in the face of death

And perhaps when we have heard that Christmas story
the story of God speaking a Word
which becomes human flesh
and falls victim to the full force
of the fires of horror that assail the earth and its inhabitants,
a Word which continues to take flesh
in all the suffering and grief and desperation
perhaps then we will be capable
of hearing the story of resurrection
and recognising that our songs of endless bliss
and our promises of sorrow turned into joy
are reduced to pious platitudes if they are not seen
in their contexts of unspeakable fear, death and anguish

I pray that we
and I
might have the courage and compassion
to recognise the Word that God speaks this week
and follow where the Word calls
into the places that terrify and horrify us
the places where we will know what it means
to cry out for salvation
the places
perhaps the only places
where we are capable of knowing
the Word of resurrection
the Word made flesh
the Christ born of Mary