

God and the Fires

The Second Sunday after Epiphany 2019

Isaiah 49:1-7, Psalm 40:1-14, 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, John 1:29-42

A priest friend, Chris Mulherin, was in Murrumbidgee working with young people at the time of the fires. A woman, tired and angry, who had been drinking, accosted him and demanded an answer to her question, "Where is God in all of this?" Perhaps she was the only person who asked this question in Murrumbidgee or in any of the fire ravaged parts of the country.

Even if she was the only one her question deserves a response. I don't know what my friend said in reply.

The question might be asked in different ways. "Where is God in all of this?" could be sadly asking about the presence of God, who seems utterly absent. The question "Where is God in all of this?" could instead be angrily asking "what is God doing about this because God seems to be doing nothing?" So, at least two questions about God and the fires.

'Where is God in all of this?' is commonly answered by Church leaders pointing to the extraordinary efforts of people, professionals and volunteers, fighting the fires and helping people. There is a great sense of working together, of care for each other, and the shared grief at the loss of life and property, with people left with little or nothing of their homes, some after a life-time and some after just settling into their place. All this is taken to be a sign of God's presence.

It seems to me in a natural disaster an older ethic resurfaces, which is palpably good, putting all other matters in perspective. In these current bush fires we can see and feel the whole nation being drawn into responding to people and animals caught up in the fire.

I think a lot of people might ask why all of that concerted outpouring of effort should be thought of as a sign of *God*' presence. It might seem to many that this is human effort at its best with no sign of *God* being involved. Why introduce *God*?

A Christian answer might be that the outpouring of all this effort is an outpouring of compassion and love and this is a sign of *God* because *God* is love. I believe most Christians would agree, but I am not sure that people who have no belief in *God*, would agree. They would still be asking, "Why introduce *God*?" Something more is needed. My responses points to the 'something more'. I am not introducing *God*. I am showing how *God* is already present but unrecognised.

I said before that all this nation-wide response to the fires seems like the resurfacing of an older ethic, drawing people together. It expresses the old belief in the unconditional worth of human life and the attachment to and valuing of animals. Recognition of this unconditional worth is fittingly and palpably shown in acts of compassion, courage, love and justice, which we deeply admire both for humans and animals suffering in the crisis.

One way we will collectively express our great admiration and thanks for all this effort is when after the fires have finished for this year, we pack the streets to cheer madly as the fieries and all others involved in fighting the fires march in the city.

So, *if* this analysis of the resurfacing of an older ethic is accurate and *if* we take this recognition of unconditional worth as a clue to reality, then my world-view, my account of reality, cannot be that everything is conditioned by everything else. For then there would be nothing that is unconditioned.

So, *if* we take this recognition of unconditional worth as a clue to reality, then our world-view has to include something that is beyond all the conditioning, something that transcends all the conditioning, something that is the ground of this unconditional worth, and must itself be of unconditional worth.

Furthermore, according to this reflection I am in touch with that 'transcendent something' at the very point when I recognise the unconditional worth of those whose lives are threatened by the fires and act to help, or when I am moved by the extraordinary effort put into fighting fires and caring for those in harm's way. Traditionally, this 'transcendent something' is called 'God'. So God is present in the outpouring of love and compassion and courage in the response to the fires. This is an epiphany of God.

This is my first explanation of how we can say, God is present in the chaos of the fires. Not because we introduce God as a little bit of spiritual embroidery, but by seeing that this recognition of unconditional worth is one of the signs of God's presence, whose presence may itself go unrecognised! This is not abstract theorising but an understanding of the response we see demonstrated in all the communities across Australia caught up in the fires.

This is my answer to the first question, where is God in all of this? Perhaps it is asked after the fires have swept through by someone who can't find any sense of God's presence with them in the chaos of the fires and the ashes left behind.

What about the second question "Where is God in all of this?" meaning, "What is God doing about this because God seems to be doing nothing?" This seems to be the question the woman is angrily asking my friend at Mallacoota. Is there an answer to this question?

Yes there is. This is what I discuss with students in the lectures I give in the subject 'God and the Natural Sciences' at the university of Melbourne, where half the students are atheists and my co-lecturer is an atheist. But maybe the woman is not looking for a lecture.

Here is what I would say if I was talking to students about God and the fires. I prepared this, but did not use it.

Our faith is that God is the creator of the universe as a whole and everything in it from the tiniest quantum of energy to the largest galaxies or black holes. From moment to moment, God is holding each and everything in existence, each thing with its own God-given powers operating lawfully in whatever are the prevailing conditions.

So, in the bush fires, God is holding in existence the created things that make up the fire, as well as the things being destroyed by the fire. This is all happening according to the God-given powers each thing has, and operating lawfully in the prevailing conditions, and of course influencing those conditions as we have seen the raging fires creating their own weather systems. We saw this in the terrible windstorm that lifted up a ten ton truck and flipped it over killing one of the occupants, the young man whose wife is expecting their first child in May.

Some of you may be recoiling from this image of God. It seems too awful for words. Can this really be God? You may think God should surely stop the fires. But faith says God is sustaining in existence all creatures with their God-given powers, including all the materials in the fire trucks and in all the planes bombing the fires, and in all the material in the telecommunications systems and on and on. And of course, there is more to say.

At the risk of making the woman angrier I might begin by asking her "What are you seeking?" which is Jesus' question to the disciples in the Gospel this morning. Who knows what she might say! I imagine that at least the woman would say she wants God to perform a miracle like we hear about in the Gospels

and she is angry with God and wants to know why God isn't doing that here today. Couldn't God bring the rain?

Part of my answer to the woman is that the miracles in the Gospels are some of the signs of the Kingdom of God that has come into the world through Jesus as a promise of the final coming of the Kingdom in glory. This is what we pray each time we say the Lord's prayer.

The miracles in the Gospels are not about God's ordinary governance of the universe which takes place through the God-given ordinary operation of this life producing universe. This ordinary operation of this universe is not through miracles which transform the ordinary operations of the created world in a given situation, like the bleeding woman who was healed when she touched Jesus' clothing or like Jesus calming the storm when they were in the boat. It would be deeply irrational of God to be intervening all over the universe to prevent the working out of the ordinary processes that God has established - even when they lead to great suffering, as in the fires, or floods, or tsunamis, ... or the screaming of the animals. This leads students to ask why God has created this kind of universe. But the answer will be for another time.

Does all this mean we can't pray for a miracle? Not at all. Our praying is a Christian response seeking signs of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. There is a parish in Melbourne which has a motto saying, "We pray, stuff happens." When I met with a group from the parish, I commended them for their praying but asked what do they do when stuff prayed for doesn't happen. They said, they have had to face this as part of their regularly praying together. They make sure that the person whose prayers were not answered is supported and does not feel it their lack of faith that led to stuff not

happening. If you pray you have to leave it in God's hands, you have to persist in prayer, and certainly you have to pay attention, both within an around you, for what happens after you pray.

There is more to say about God and the fires and here I have been pressing our Christian faith to address just two questions coming out of the experience of the fires. Before I finish I should also say that human induced climate change is implicated in producing the conditions leading to these fires that all the experts and experienced rural people say are well beyond anything they have encountered before. This is beyond even the black Saturday fires of 2009. So in addition to asking what God is doing about the fires let us take stock of what we are doing individually and as a nation to contribute to the planet beginning to be outraged, with much worse to come. At the Cathedral we have only made a small beginning on thinking about living in a climate emergency, we have yet to begin any action. There is scope for you to contribute as another part of our theme, 'God and the fires'. If you are unsure how, please ask.

As we go about lives as Christians in the Church and in the world, may God give us grace to be as innocent as doves and wise as serpents.