

Saving those in Peril: on Land and on the Seas

23rd October 2022

A sermon preached on 23 October 2022 by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at the annual Seafarers' Service:

Readings: [Joel 2.23-32](#), [Psalm 65](#), [2 Timothy 4.6-8, 16-18](#), [Luke 18.15-30](#)

The largest peacetime maritime rescue operation in Australia's history took four days, during which The Royal Australian Navy evacuated more than 1,000 people from Mallacoota. I will never forget the impact of the 2020 bushfires on that sleepy beach town on the east coast. Residents and holidaymakers cut off and forced to shelter for more than 24 hours on the beach under blood-red skies. I was Vicar General—Acting Archbishop—at the time, and in daily contact with the bishop of Gippsland, and the clergy and chaplains who provided pastoral care. We prayed; we raised funds; and we coordinated the pastoral response. It took an ADF Chinook chopper to bring Bishop Richard and a team of chaplains to Mallacoota.

Earlier this year, another national crisis called on our Navy. In February, South Queensland and New South Wales experienced unprecedented rainfall, leading to devastating floods. In only three days, Brisbane received about as much rain as the City of London typically does in a whole year and the northern rivers region received more than 60% of its annual rainfall. This time, communities were cut off by floods, not fire. Aircrew from Navy's 816 Squadron were deployed to winch people to safety from the roofs of their inundated homes. Having assisted in rescues in the 2020 bushfires, this was their first flood evacuation.

A month later, HMAS *Shepparton* and *Yarra* were deployed to clear up the mess, removing debris from the Brisbane river, Queensland ports and the shipping lanes in Moreton bay. And we are not through yet with *Operation Flood Assist*. As we meet, ADF personnel are at work again to rescue flood victims, air dropping supplies to isolated communities, and feed and fodder for livestock. As we face the impact of the changing climate in our nation, the nature of Navy's missions change and adapt, too; providing vital support to our local communities. Thank you for your service to our nation, and our most vulnerable communities.

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In times of trouble, we draw not only on our skills and training, but also on our spiritual resources to sustain us. The defence and emergency chaplains providing pastoral support in recovery and evacuation centres in flood affected areas today are a living symbol of that. This morning's readings encourage us to draw on our faith—on our belief in a God who is sovereign—as we face the challenges of today. Our first lesson, from the prophecy of Joel, records God's words of encouragement to his people after an enormous environmental crisis: years of severe draught, made worse by a severe locust plague. God stands by his people in time of trouble, the prophet Joel tells. God saves his people from danger, and has the power to reverse and restore the fortunes of his people.

The key to the salvation of our world is our trust and reliance on God, Joel knows. God calls those whom he saves, and those who call on God will be saved. Those who call on God will be equipped to withstand the challenges they face, because they will be given his Spirit: 'I will pour out my spirit on all flesh', God promises. It is that Spirit which will power the transformation of his people and, through his people, this world.

Inspired by God's Spirit, women and men, old and young, slaves and free—all flesh that has breath—will be able to envision and work for a future world that is free from division and disaster, conflict and corruption. All people—regardless of who or what they are—have the capacity to receive his Spirit of

transformation, if only they call on him, and place their trust in him. 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved', Joel assures us.

The writer of our psalm echoes our first lesson: God has made the world and is sovereign over it. He has 'girded with power, and stills the raging of the seas, the roaring of the waves, and the tumults of the people'. While those who are far from God—'who dwell at the end of the earth, are afraid of God's wonders'—those who love God praise him. Those whose prayers have been answered sing of God's wonders—the silent song of the universe echoing our own. Whenever we praise our deliverer, the silent voices of dawn and the evening join our songs, our psalm knows.

Why do we sing God's praise? Because he will re-establish the good purposes of his creation. Girded by power and strength, he will deliver his creation—he alone is our Saviour. The psalm writer assures us, God's people, that if we turn to God, 'confess their sins, and be purged of their misdeeds', God will 'tend the earth and water it; making it rich and fertile'. All creation will share in the song of God's power to restore what has been broken, even the land sings: 'the hills are girded with joy; the meadows are clothed with sheep, and the valleys stand so thick with corn, they shout for joy and sing'.

It is we, God's people, who are charged to bring about the transformation and restoration of creation he promises. In the crises we have faced, as fires raged and floods have risen, destroyed homes and displaced communities, we have seen the best of humanity at work. Both those who serve our nation in uniform, and we who work or volunteer, play an important part in addressing the dangers that face us. Those who have served on the frontlines of the climate crisis are just as important as are those who raised funds and awareness, who prayed and who, out of our convictions, have changed our ways of life, and our carbon footprints.

Our gospel reading gives us a pointer as to the attitude required by God's people to bring about the lasting, positive change that transforms the world, and restores creation. A local political leader talks to Jesus about what it takes to gain the life that lasts forever. Jesus tells him that two things are needed: keeping God's laws, and giving up greed. Instead of extracting riches for ourselves, we should build up treasure that lasts—we should build up heavenly riches. Jesus calls the politician to change at a fundamental level by exchanging earthly security with heavenly certainty, and then invites him to follow him. 'Sell all you own, and distribute the money to the poor; then come, follow me', he tells him. The politician walks away. Sad but unchanged, 'for he was very rich', we hear.

And Jesus tells his friends: 'How hard is it for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God'. Jesus' comparison sounded then as it does now. His friends understand that compared to God's standards no one really can be saved. 'Then who can be saved?', they ask Jesus. And Jesus assures them that God will work with us despite our shortcomings, our greed, our stupidity, or hardness of heart: 'What is impossible for mortals is possible for God', he tells them.

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As they traverse the oceans of our world to bring us our goods or helm our fishing fleets, the estimated 1.7 million Seafarers experience the effect of a changing climate on their livelihoods. They can see shipping channels change, and observe first-hand the effect of rising sea temperatures on marine habitats and the resulting loss of fish populations. Nearer to home, in Australia, we will see more severe fires and floods, longer hotter summers or wetter winters, more cyclones, and destructive storms. Again, the impact will be felt more severely by our remote and island communities. Climate change already tests the limits of adaptation in ecosystems such as the Great Barrier reef. Like their Pacific neighbours, the Torres Straits are endangered by rapidly eroding coastlines. Floods test families who face increasing inundation due to rising sea levels, but lack the means to move to safer ground.

The river floods across our State tell us that here in Victoria we are not immune from the climate emergency. Like the rest of our nation, we will continue to be severely impacted by climate change.

Inaction will not only lead to more frequent extreme weather events. It will also lead to erosion of coastlines and rising sea-levels. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change projects that by the end of this century sea levels in our State will have risen by more than a meter, impacting coastal communities across the Bay area, Lakes Entrance, Port Fairy, Apollo Bay and Inverloch. Unless we take urgent action, some of the ports we bless in today's service may not be there in a generation or two.

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Today's readings tell us that there is only one way out of the crises we face—spiritual and physical: turning away from our past behaviours and turning our lives God-wards. Our readings call this turning 'repentance'. 'To you, O God, all flesh come to confess their sins; only you can purge away sin', the writer of our psalm puts it. Repentance is active and requires action. It literally requires an effort as great as that of slimming down and shrinking a camel to enable it to pass through the eye of a needle. It requires the kind of change that is radical and complete.

We will need to work swiftly to make the kinds of radical changes to the way we consume and create energy. We urgently need to implement renewable energy generation measures, such as solar harvesting, and put in place energy efficiency measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions—including finding sustainable ways to transport our cargo by transitioning to clean ocean-going vessels. And we need to give support to those that serve the most vulnerable in our communities, whether that's supporting First Nations communities facing sustained unbearable heat in Central Australia, Torres Strait Islander communities facing coastal erosion, Seafarers whose jobs may be at risk by the energy transition in the shipping industry, or the members of our Navy and Emergency services as develop their crisis response across our nation.

God calls us to turn to him and, in turning, to save our world. Being a follower of Jesus means placing God's will for his world to be healed and reconciled first. That work will be hard, and will demand of all our gifts and skills. At the end we may feel a bit like St Paul did in our second lesson: 'poured out as a libation'. But God assures us that he will stand by us and give us strength to work for his kingdom to grow and for his justice to flourish in our communities. He will rescue us—especially from our own short-sightedness and greed—and save us for his heavenly kingdom.

God calls you and me to turn to him, and experience his friendship and love. He calls each one of us to change our lives and our living, and promises that when we follow his call his creation will be preserved, and flourish, so that future generations may experience his goodness, grace and love. He assures us that he will not forsake us in times of crisis. But that he will hear our call, and honour our sacrifices by gifting us life in his friendship now, and in his presence forever. God promises to preserve us both here on earth, and to save us for his heavenly kingdom. Because what looks impossible for mortals, is possible for the God who loves to save those in peril—and longs for his people to thank him by their 'glad hymns of praise from land and sea'.

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