

**SIFTING THROUGH THE ASHES – REV'D CATHERINE EATON – LENT 1 SUNDAY 1ST
MARCH 2009**

Readings: Gen 9.8-17, Ps 25.1-10, Poem “*Night after Bushfire*” by Judith Wright, Mk 1.9-15

The ash sticks to your fingers, pale and dead-looking, flaky bits and chunks of lifeless stuff. Burnt memories of times more normal, predictable, colourful, moist.

Rainbow times when life's promise could be glimpsed though never held. But now there are no rainbows, nor clouds, nor moisture to colour the sky with refracted light. Just monochrome – shades of grey and black. While we sit in ash, it would seem that the god of fire has trumped the God of the rainbow. Promises, promises – the creatures of the covenant have been cut off. Nice words to Noah but we wonder perhaps what has become of God's covenant with his creation?

As you came into church this morning, you may have noticed the font, the place of our baptism, the place of the waters of new life, filled instead with ash. The font is the place of our dying and our rising – our dying to the old life and our rising again with Christ. In the sacrament of our baptism we take on for ourselves Christ's journey through death to resurrection and its new possibilities.

As we live with the memories of Black Saturday so close, as the fires still smoulder and threaten, and as the crackling dryness of our own backyard alerts us to the vulnerability of this Peninsula, Lent begins in ash indeed. Ash – clinging to our fingers and our faces (+), reminding us of our mortality, our fragility and limitation, our vulnerability.

On Ash Wednesday those present received the mark of the ash. We burnt the old crosses in the church, watched the flames and smelled the smoke. This year, not just a symbol of the Christian life but a too real symbol of the dramas of these days, these changing times as the familiar ground beneath us seems to shake and tremble and something shadowy hangs about us.

Our theme for this Lent is '*Out of the Ashes*'. We begin in ash – it is clear – not just the ashes of fire but the burnings of economic change - too close we've seen in recent days the apparent greed associated with job loss for so many clothing workers. Not just the ashes of fire but the burnings of environmental change – too close we've heard in recent days the endless debates about carbon trading.

We don't know how we will emerge from these times – we simply begin with the ash and start the journey from here, not knowing where it will lead us. So I encourage you over these weeks to reflect on the ash in the font, touch it, consider your own mortality, and the dryness in your own life and soul. The Paschal candle is gone, there is no holy water in the stoop, nor in the font. Dry and dangerous times indeed. Rough and crumpled hessian, the purple of repentance at least begins to add colour to these grey days. We need to linger a little longer over the dying through this Lent.

How we long to rise quickly from these ashes, get things back to normal, see the rainbows again. How we long to wash off this death even now, to step out into a world under control again. But as the gospel and the poem warn us – these are the times of temptation, when our very souls are at risk.

Mark's gospel wastes no time on unnecessary detail. In rapid succession, we are told of Jesus' baptism, the temptations, and the beginning of his public ministry, all in 7 verses. He wants us to make the links for ourselves.

Jesus is baptised – initiated into the mysteries of the Kingdom of God, given special grace and favour, and entrusted with introducing the world to God’s greater vision.

But immediately temptation raises its ugly head and he is driven out into a dry and wild place. We are not told the temptations here. Mark simply wants us to recognise this almost necessary step between the initiation and the fulfillment. Wrestling with temptation and resisting it, is somehow essential to the task of bringing the Kingdom to light, of making God’s greater vision a reality. Jesus wrestled with temptation and resisted its seductions and so stepped out to proclaim that new reality, the sign of God’s promises being fulfilled in his day.

Even though the temptations are not mentioned by Mark – do we remember them?

1. Turn rocks into bread – ‘Man shall not live by bread alone.’
2. All the kingdoms of the world are yours if you will worship me – ‘Worship God alone.’
3. Throw yourself off – the angels will come – ‘Do not put the Lord to the test.’

In essence, Jesus was tempted to reduce God’s vision, to make the Kingdom small and predictable, something he could control, where he could be master. The temptations were all about superficial realities and false economies with the soul as currency. How often we barter with our souls, for the sake of a few small visions, fleeting pleasures and moments of glory. How readily we are tempted to forego God’s greater vision for some more immediate possibilities.

The poem by Judith Wright also reminds us that all too often our souls are chained to the normalities of daylight. Yet fire has burned all that away. Our temptation is to look around to what once was, but here perhaps is our chance to flee with our souls intact.

Jesus was baptised, then tempted and then released into God’s new beginning. We have experienced perhaps a baptism by fire, which may not yet be over – we do not know how the summer will finish, how the economic climate will change or what havoc climate change will bring. But I sense now we are in that place of temptation. Faced with the dryness and the wilderness of this burning and these uncertain times, how we long to get back to normal, to grab at something more tangible.

We have had the baptism of fire which has released so much, laid bare the ashes of our lives, not just those of the fire victims. Our temptation is to get up too quickly out of the ashes – in our desire to make things look and feel normal again.

But this is the time to reflect on the ashes of our own lives, to consider those things that have served their purpose, those parts of ourselves that have been burnt once too often, those parts of our lives that are lifeless and empty, those things that just bring us to tears, offering nothing but grief or pain.

Lent is the time to touch into the ashes of our failed projects and broken dreams, our lost hope and dried out wonder. Lent offers us a chance to sit with our fragility, our doubts, our fears, all those grey things that we avoid. It is a time to sift through the ashes of our relationships, our banished desires, our accumulations of possessions. It is a time to weep, not just for bushfire victims, but for ourselves and our own souls.

For our souls have had it hard I think for too long in this materialistic age. Time and time again we push down upon our souls, so that we can get on with daily life unhindered in our attempts to keep ourselves and others happy. But so much running about, skating on the surface, rarely achieves what we desire.

But now we have ashes for Lent. It is easier to be with rainbows but here we have no rainbows. Here we have dryness, the beginnings of desert. We have ashes and a time to sit and grieve a while. If we really look, there is so much to be sad about. What happens to all our tears?

Here we have a chance to sift through the ashes of our lives, searching for the fragments of things forgotten and remembering moments lived and loved. We have this season of Lent to peer through the doors that have been closed within us and find what treasures and what skeletons remain there.

Too quickly we would rise from out of the ashes – but this time is gift which can point us to a greater vision, a wider view of life, a new trust in ourselves, a deeper faith. God's vision is much greater than ours. This can be our way into it. Jesus resisted the temptation to reduce God's vision to something more familiar and safe and tangible. He resisted the temptation to close the doors on a new possibility and so he was able to speak the Kingdom into reality, to demonstrate God's bigger vision.

Ashes speak of death and so naturally we push the ashes of our lives away – but they hang about us even when we try to forget. They leave us vulnerable and shrouded even when we don't realise they are there.

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But that is the temptation – yes, the fire victims need to be looked after – we need to keep on doing that and being generous. We need to support these communities as they find their way out of the ashes. We need to support peoples in other nations for whom poverty, disease and violence are daily fact of life. But we also need to stay in the ashes of our own lives long enough for our own healing. We need to sift through the old stuff, to prepare for the coming of the new.

We begin this journey of Lent in the belief something new can begin. So let us not reach too quickly for the old and familiar, or even for the new beginning. Let us not reach too quickly for a lesser vision, nor settle too quickly for something that does not satisfy, that pleases the body, the mind, for a time but leaves the soul still thirsty. Let us not search too soon for the rainbows.

For it is not rainbows we seek, but that overarching vision of God where we and all things can be made new. For now we simply must wait, fearful and uncertain as that is. So touch the ashes, sift them through, get your hands dirty, cry in your pillow and be tender with your soul.

For what is yet to be is not yet.

*“Carry like a threatened thing your soul away,
for he whose soul wears the strict chains of day
will lose it in this landscape of charcoal and moonlight.”*
Night after Bushfire – Judith Wright

Catherine Eaton