

**THE TREE THAT REFUSES TO DIE – REV'D CATHERINE EATON
LENT 4 – SUNDAY 22 MARCH.2009**

Readings: Numbers 21.4-9, Ps 107.1-3,17-22, Poem, Jn 3.14-21

Poem: 'We will not die, said the trees' Marie-Louise Stephens
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*First there was drought.
No sap rose
in our limbs.
Our leaves curled tight,
saving, protecting.
The air grew thick
and gaseous with
evaporating oils.*

*Then came the fire,
We would have fled
the evil place,
our roots too deep
and firm.
The fire crept
up the bark,
it burnt and hurt.
No air to breathe.
The void filled
with the crackle and
the laughter of the fire.*

*We burned,
until we stood
tall and branchless,
gaunt like old men.
The fire burnt out.
Black bark dropped
To the ground.*

*Finally came rain
and from deep down
we sucked a strength
and drank,
and when our thirst
was satisfied
we probed and stretched.*

*We will not die, we said.
Green buds appeared, grew.
In a few weeks
thin green branches*

*surrounded us
like Spanish Moss,
hiding our nakedness.*

*The leaves, grey-green,
shake off the rain
and cover tenderly
the blackened trunks,
curious, compassionate,
defiant.*

“Out of the Ashes” has been our theme for Lent this year, a theme which reflects the tragedy of the bushfires, and our hope and belief that life will rise again out of that deadly burning. It is also a theme which reflects our Lenten beginning on Ash Wednesday, when we were marked with the ash of our mortality, in the hope and belief that through these weeks of Lent and into Easter, new life will rise again in us.

I don't know what this theme has meant to you, but it has been a significant image for me this Lent. I have tried to stay with the ashes of my life, sifting them through, reflecting on what has been and is no more. It is a sobering exercise and one we don't do much as we hurtle through life from one thing to the next.

What are the ashes of your life – the big losses and changes which have changed the whole landscape of your life, but also the small things that were part of your life for a time and are no more?

I think back over all the people I have met in a life-time, who came and went. I sift through the memories of them. I remember small possessions and passing events, challenging involvements and joyous activities, a scene from a holiday, an anger never quite resolved, a love that has gone. So many things, big and small, which make up the landscapes of our lives, but now so much of it gone with the years, with the changes and the burnings. What are the ashes of your lives?

It is important – to cast our eyes back over the landscape of our lives, to acknowledge the ashes, the things that no longer hold life for us, the things that are scarred from burning, the things that have just disappeared: the failed projects, the unfulfilled dreams, the times and places that have gone, the relationships broken, the people who have faded away, the strengths and abilities which have deserted us, the joys of youth and longing. So many things which have been part of our lives which have gone, no longer visible on our life landscape. So many things no longer viable, no longer holding life or hope for us.

All of us have ashes scattered across our lives where the years have done their burning, where there was life, but is no more.

This Lent I have tried to stay with the ashes, to grieve for what was, to sift it through for the remaining treasures, and to let it go. As we see the blackened landscapes of Victoria from last month, it is also good for us to cast our eyes over the burnt landscapes of our lives, to remember, to grieve and to let things go.

Like the fire victims though, when there has been a loss, we never know how the future will come. We cannot know how life will grow out of the ashes.

But today's poem reminds us of the tree that refuses to die. Already we are hearing stories and seeing pictures of the new green leaves emerging from black bark and small shoots rising out of the dark earth. The Australian bush is good at this.

And in all of us, there is a tree that refuses to die. When our lives are blackened by death, loss or failure, by sickness, change or abandonment, that is when we can discover that one tree in us that refuses to die. Through all the devastations of our lives, it remains, sprouting again and again, in fact growing stronger, as with each fire or flood or violent breaking it puts its roots down that much deeper and strengthens within as it gathers itself to grow again.

But all too often it is only when the burning comes, that we discover again that thing in us which is at our core, that part of us which refuses to die, that tree of life which keeps renewing and strengthening with the years.

In today's readings we hear some echoes of this. In the first reading, the Hebrew people are in the wilderness. They have left behind the relative security of Egypt and are faced with an endless wilderness with no food, water or direction. They complain and matters become worse when they are set upon by poisonous snakes. Everything they knew has gone. They are vulnerable and afraid. Their lives also have turned to ash. Yet from the midst of this devastation rises up one sign of hope, a tree of healing. God hears the prayer of Moses and tells him to make a serpent and put it on a pole so everyone who looks at it can live.

In the gospel, we hear the echo of this. Jesus has just cleansed the temple. Then Nicodemus the Pharisee comes to him in the secrecy of night to find out about this man. There is a sense of things happening. There is a darkness about. Throughout John's gospel we hear this interplay of darkness and light.

In the well-known words of the prologue to the gospel, we hear the anticipation of the light shining in the darkness, the one true light which was coming into the world. So here is Jesus, the light of the world, who will not be overcome by the darkness about him.

The circumstances for the people of Jesus' day were dark. There was persecution and oppression, fear and division. A dark landscape indeed. One could imagine here people sitting in ashes, longing for what had been lost, grieving for a world that had gone.

But then the echo of the first reading, *'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so will the Son of Man be lifted up.'* The cross, the sign of death, on which Jesus will be lifted up will become instead a sign of life. The one tree that will rise out of the ashes, the tree that refuses to die.

Perhaps I need to say one thing about the second part of today's gospel which seems so harsh and so at odds with the huge expression of love in those well-known words – For God so loved the world, he gave his only Son. God is primarily concerned with loving the world and saving the world, not condemning the world. Yet we hear this bald statement that those who do not believe are condemned.

This must be taken in context of John's gospel and cannot be placed literally onto today's world. What Jesus is pointing to here are the people of his day who condemn themselves by choosing the ways of darkness even when the light was before them. If people persist in choosing the ways of darkness, they will do damage to themselves, they will condemn themselves to a life of darkness.

Jesus is sent not to condemn the world but to show us another way. John's gospel is at great pains to remind us we have a choice between darkness and light, but also great hope, for even in the darkness the light of Christ is not overcome. So we cannot read this literally, thinking of people we know who don't believe. Often they, our unbelieving neighbours and friends, are more full of light than we are! Jesus is talking here about the people who persistently choose the ways of darkness.

So in these readings we see the pole holding the serpent, the sign of death lifted up to become the sign of healing. We see the cross, the sign of death, holding Jesus, lifted up to become the sign of life.

In the midst of the wilderness, in the midst of darkness, these two trees have been lifted up as signs of life undefeated. In the ashes of the burnt landscape, trees sprout again as signs of life undefeated. As we too cast our eyes across the vast landscapes of our lives, we too will find a tree that refuses to die, a tree which has sprouted again and again through all the devastations, the big changes and the small events.

I encourage you over these last two weeks of Lent, if you haven't already, to sift through the ashes of your lives, the things that are gone, the things that no longer hold life for you. Sit with the ashes, remember, and grieve if you need to, and then cast your eyes across the landscape of your lives to find the tree that refuses to die, the constant source of life within you.

Then came the fire.....We will not die, we said.

Catherine Eaton