

## **Exile and Ashes: Images for Lent - Colleen Clayton – Sunday 29 March 2009**

**Readings: Jer 31.31-34, Ps 119. 9-16, Poem, John 12. 20-33**

People from the burnt out towns of Victoria, are currently returning to places that are unrecognizable. The trees, fences, undergrowth and buildings that shaped the landscape have either gone or have been radically altered. Many of their friends, family and neighbours are gone and will never return. Slowly, people are returning but they are going back to places that once were beautiful and familiar and now are comfortless and strange. They are going home but home has gone.

In today's reading from Jeremiah we heard the words of the prophet spoken to the Hebrew people in exile in Babylon: people who, through very different circumstances from the bushfire survivors, had also experienced profound and violent loss and the need to find new landmarks to orientate themselves both physically and spiritually.

It is in exile that Jeremiah tells the people that the time is coming when they will find God's law inside themselves. God will write it in their hearts and they shall know God in a new way; a way that no longer relies on external circumstances but is a part of their very being. I'm fairly sure that under those circumstances I would want to say to him, "I'm not interested in knowing God in a whole new way. I want to know God in the old way that I liked and was familiar with and that told me who I was and how I should behave. I want to know God the way I've always known God."

Having the pattern of life changed and destroyed is a deeply traumatic experience. The Jewish exile was violent and alienating with profound consequences for generations of people. The Victorian bushfires have changed the landscape and people's lives forever. Change of this kind is horrific, earth shattering and it rocks us to our core. It is not simply the physical loss that occurs but the loss of our ability to know how life works and how we fit into it. Inevitably, it changes how we know God.

However, although we usually don't like it, life does bring dislocation and change. Sometimes it is profound like that wrought by bushfires and sometimes it seems smaller but it still shakes us. The exile, the ashes, these can be powerful metaphors when we find our lives unsettled, broken, changed. In Australia, the burnt bush itself provides us with metaphors for finding God in a new way in the face of death and loss.

There are some trees that survive fires by drawing their life force deep within themselves, submitting to the pruning of the fire and afterwards, sending out new growth so that soon the only evidence of the fire is the blackened bark of the trunk and major branches.

Others, such as the Mountain Ash do not withstand fire well. Those magnificent trees die in the heat. However, the openness caused by fire allows in the light and warmth that brings the growth of new Mountain Ash saplings.

Some trees have seed pods so hard that only the force of a fire can burst them open, allowing the seeds inside to be exposed to light and water and to grow.

Sometimes the established forest is wounded too deeply to regenerate and the pioneer plants take over. Not the great, majestic trees but the scruffy little, short-lived varieties that fill in the spaces and get ready for something more permanent to happen in the future.

These are wonderful metaphors for Lent. As we hear God's promise that we will know God in our hearts, perhaps we can realize that only through change will we come to that new knowledge. Perhaps we might dare to consider the message of the bush.

If change was to prune my life, what new shoots might God want me to encourage?  
If the big things in my life were to be burnt and destroyed what majestic, new things would God allow to grow in their place?

Do I have seeds within me that are in pods so hard that only a mighty catastrophe will force me to release them?

What pioneering things might God be inviting me to begin so that other, bigger things might follow?

After the death of who I have been and what I have known, how and where will I seek to know God in a new way?

John's Gospel today tells us that, "*unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*" Of course, seeds don't really die when they fall to earth, but they do lose their form as seeds. They must burst open and no longer be seeds in order to bear fruit. This is another metaphor for the growth that comes through the loss of the old and its transformation into the new. Jesus tells us that, "*those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*" It is through change and death that we come to new life.

The image of the seed changing in the earth is a gentle one but the bushfires remind us that often change comes upon us swiftly and unannounced and we are left reeling in its wake and, like the exiled Hebrews, crying for the life we have known. That kind of change can make it hard to know God in our hearts.

The poem we heard read today was written by a man who had experienced the traumatic and sudden change brought by bushfire. He tells us about a saucepan that was his sole remaining possession.

*Bent  
But never enough to stop me  
Boiling the water  
Whilst  
I lost everything  
We're not losing our cup of tea.*

So perhaps he gives us good advice for our Lenten journey. This blackened, bent saucepan has been changed but has still retained its essence. Its purpose is to boil water and despite everything,

it is still fit for its purpose. Jesus says, “*Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.*” The ashes of Lent call us to face change and uncertainty. But through all that Jesus calls us to remain fit for our purpose; to follow and to serve. Painful though it is, we are to lose even the desire for life as it was. Instead we are to look into our hearts to find the God who is present in all circumstances, all places and all times and whose desire for us is new life, springing from death.

*I'll build again (the poet says)  
There is no time for feeling sorry  
Only for pouring the tea  
For heroes.*

*(Written and Published by Paul Buttigieg)*

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