**Homily – 05-01-20 – Second Sunday After Christmas**

In the name of our loving, liberating, and life-giving God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good morning friends and happy New Year! But, what a tough start to this year. The news this past week has been dominated by the stark reality of bush fires impacting upon the lives of Australian people and communities. In previous years I remember fires impacting one State or another, but this
current season seems to be without precedent with fires simultaneously burning in New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia, and Western Australia.

I was particularly moved by the images from Mallacoota in Victoria, and Bateman's Bay in New South Wales. Images of people from each of those communities huddling on the beach watching their communities burn. I know people in each of those communities and had an increasing concern for them as fires cut off their exit roads, and power and tele-communication towers were destroyed.

People like you and I have lost family members and friends; they have lost homes and businesses; and, understandably, they are anxious about the future. When will power and water services be restored? Will it be possible or wise to rebuild communities as they were? And, what support will there be for them in the coming days, weeks, months, and years?

As we have watched the images and have listened to people tell the story of their ordeals, it would be strange if we were not moved with compassion. Individuals, parishes and Dioceses have reached out to those effected asking what they can do to help. But there is also a nagging fear about what the remainder of the summer will bring for the communities we live in. How will communities like Stanthorpe fight fires when even their drinking water is now being trucked in? So many places suffering from long term drought have large amounts of dry grass and trees ready to burn... so, we have good reason to feel anxious, and perhaps a little afraid.

I think the Gospel reading this weekend offers us something significant to this lived experience of anxiety and fear. The verses begin with the well-known words 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...' which is rich and poetic phrasing, but perhaps a
bit abstract to bring comfort and hope? But a little further we come, in verse fourteen, to what some commentators call the heart of John's prologue. It says, 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only song, full of grace and truth...'
Eugene Peterson in his idiomatic Bible translation called The Message expresses this same verse, 'The Word was made flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one of a kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to
finish.'

Peterson suggests that the Word did not just 'live among us', but 'moved into the neighbourhood..!' I like that image of God moving into the neighbourhood with all the positive connotations of people who recognise each other and share life together but 'neighbourhood' is an urban term that
describes a district or community within a town. I think Peterson creatively uses it well for people living in that context, but the phrase needs more work for those who live in rural and remote contexts. Perhaps, 'The Word was made flesh and blood and moved in next door...' might work but
even that becomes problematic in remote Australia when the nearest neighbour may live more than one hundred kilometres away! Maybe, 'The Word was made flesh and blood and moved in with us...' comes closer to what we remembered and celebrated at Christmas. God being no longer far away and distant, but rather Emmanuel, God with us.

God with people as they waited anxiously in the evacuation centre of Bateman's Bay, bringing comfort. God facing the raging flames and holding the hoses beside fire-fighters at Mallacoota, giving strength. God with arms around those who grieved the loss of loved ones and loved homes, in so any places.

Emmanuel... God with us.

God the healer; God the hope.
God the comforter; God the teacher.
God the lover; God the friend.
God who meets us in prayer, God who meets us in life.

Emmanuel... God with us.

Let's pray:

Loving God we give thanks for the gift of our lives and the promise of the coming year. We give thanks for all that we have and remember all whose lives have been impacted by fires in recent weeks. We ask your blessing upon them and pray that they get the support they need. We also ask for your blessing upon all levels of leadership as we reflect together on this
fire season and make plans for the future. We pray in the name of the one
we call Emmanuel - God with us. Amen.