

Homily – 22-03-20 – Lent 4

In recent years we have had in Queensland and New South Wales prolonged drought and as dams dried up and bores stopped producing there was understandable anxiety about the future. Some of our wise old people said that they had not seen the land so dry since they were children in the nineteen forties and fifties. Then we had fires in Australia on a scale that have not been seen before, and time and again voluntary fire fighters went above and beyond the call of duty.

Thankfully, in most places, it then rained steadily and well. Fires were put out, dams were filled, and where possible a crop of grain was planted. For those primary producers who live on the land, and the communities that help sustain them, the rain brought hope and this coming year was filled with promise.

Then we started to hear about the impact a new strain of Coronavirus was having in other parts of the world. First in China, then Iran and Italy, and now in each country... including our own. Each unsettling news report gives us an update on how many people are infected and how many people have died. Country by country, and in Australia... State by State. Unlike the drought and fires that were Australia specific, this pandemic is directly or indirectly impacting all human communities on the planet.

Thanks to our global scientific community there is a developing understanding about how the virus is transmitted and who in our community is most vulnerable. I will not reiterate everything that we have been told but there is a clear challenge for us to reduce the rate of transmission so that when people become critically ill our health services are able to cope. If too many people become infected too quickly then our health services will be overwhelmed.

Clearly these are tough times... and tough decisions are being made by Federal and State government authorities. Their current advice is that community gatherings be limited to less than one hundred people, and that there needs to be significant distance between people when they meet. Many organisations have already arranged for their staff to work from home, and there is a clear sense that this will soon become mandatory.

Last Thursday, after consulting with health authorities and the Diocesan Leadership Team, our Archbishop made the tough call to suspend public worship in Anglican churches throughout the Diocese from Monday 23rd March.

This will not mean that we cease to be a community of faith, rather it means we will be a community of faith that will be sustained in new and unfamiliar ways. Historically, Sunday worship has been a vital way that we have been sustained and nurtured in our relationship with God and with each other. Each week we have gathered and sung together, prayed together, listened to Bible readings and teaching, broken bread together, and been sent out... renewed by God's Spirit. After gathering for worship we have also been blessed socially by time with friends over a cup of tea or coffee... So, how can we continue to be sustained in our relationship with God when we are not able to meet together on a Sunday? And, how can we ensure that people are supported and loved when there are clear directions not to meet, to socially distance when we do, and for some... to isolate themselves completely?

In God's grace, our Parishes are blessed to have Ordained and lay leadership in various forms. An

urgent focus for each Parish is to ensure that we know how to get in touch with people and what their preferred method of communication is. This will include landline phone numbers, mobile phone numbers, email addresses, and Facebook profile names. Keeping in touch with people will help to sustain us in the journey we're called to travel together, and it will be important to share the load.

For example, if a Parish leader keeps in touch with seven people each week, and those seven people keep in touch with seven people each week... then forty-three people will be feeling connected and cared for. But, in those phone calls as well as asking how the person is going - it will be helpful close these calls in prayer. It may be simply praying the Lord's Prayer together, or it may be each person praying for God's blessing on the other person and their family... and things going on in the world.

What a gift it would be when we are again permitted to gather together for public worship to find ourselves a Church in which all members are comfortable praying out loud with another person... because we've been doing it for months on the phone!

On Sunday mornings a growing number of Parishes are working to livestream worship and in the Western Region this includes St Bart's (Toowoomba), St Luke's (Toowoomba), and St Paul's (Ipswich). I will share more details when these have been confirmed.

Recognising that some people in our congregations do not have access to the internet Parishes are also planning to print worship resources each week and drop them in to people's homes... while keeping appropriate physical distance!

For all in our parishes, our schools, and Anglicare... there is a clear sense that we are in this together, and that God will sustain us in this season of being dispersed.

I think the Psalm set by the lectionary for this Sunday's worship is hugely encouraging. It is probably the best known and most loved of the Psalms because it talks about God being our shepherd. A shepherd who refreshes our soul, who leads us to green pastures, and who walks with us in both good and bad times. A shepherd who is constant, loving, and kind throughout our life's journey and beyond this. The Lord is my shepherd; the Lord is your shepherd; and in the grace of God we will get through this together.

Sometimes it's hard to know what to pray when things feel a bit overwhelming, but let's pray now: God of grace and love, we give thanks for the gift of our lives and for the hope that comes from faith in you.

As we face an uncertain future, renew us each day and give us courage;
Help us to be wise, compassionate, and creative,
as we find new ways of being Church and being community.
We pray for your blessing particularly
on all who are serving in the frontline of medical care,
and those who are working to develop a vaccine.
We pray in the name of the one who healed the sick, and set the captives
free;
Jesus Christ our Good Shepherd and Lord.
Amen