

Epiphany 1 - 09/01/22 - Bishop Cam Venables

Readings: **Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-22**

This week we're going to hear from the Hebrew speaking prophet Isaiah and touch base with a Japanese Saint, before landing back in the context of COVID and personal faith. Such is the nature of our time!

Through the prophet Isaiah God said to the people of Israel, *'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine!'* And, as if that was not enough reassurance, he continued, *'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you...'*

As Christians we tend to think that the promise and prophecy of Isaiah was not just for the Jewish community, to whom it was originally given, but for all who follow Christ. Let's be honest, it's hugely comforting to think of God being with us as we work through the challenges that are an inevitable part of life.

With the rapidly rising rate of COVID-19 infection in Queensland we are facing significant new challenges. I now have friends and colleagues who have tested positive for COVID, and others who have family members who have tested positive. Consequently, they are in home quarantine and are unable to work. Hospital and aged care communities have staff in quarantine and they have the challenge of finding staff to cover shifts and provide care in what is really the early stage of the Omicron wave. One parish leader I spoke to yesterday has started getting COVID care kits ready to drop off to infected parishioners next week. These have some practical grocery items as well as a note assuring these people that they are remembered and cared for.

Of course, long before COVID there were things that could leave us feeling overwhelmed and isolated. The disorientation caused by relationship breakdown, redundancy, or retirement can feel like the end of the world; and in a similar way injury and illness can leave us feeling lost. Even in the lonely experience of grief we may have found hope in the promise that God is with us and clung to that like a drowning person clinging to a raft. *'Fear not for I am with you!'* God says a number of times through the prophet Isaiah... *'Remember, I am with you always...'* are the last words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew.

Takashi Nagai was a medical scientist working in Nagasaki. His specialist area was radiography, but because of exposure to radiation through his research, he was diagnosed with leukemia in 1944. Takashi and his wife, Midori, were active members of the Catholic community in Nagasaki which had been established in the Sixteenth Century. Consequently, they drew strength from the promise that God would be with them in the difficult days of his illness.

However, on the sixth of August 1945, a B-29 bomber dropped an atomic bomb on the industrial city of Hiroshima, which destroyed five square miles of the city and killed an estimated eighty thousand people. Alarmed by this news Takashi and Midori sent their son and daughter away from Nagasaki to stay with their grandmother. Soon after they had left, a second B-29 bomber dropped a more powerful atomic bomb on Nagasaki with the air crew using the steeple of Urakami Catholic Cathedral to guide their bomb run.

Mark Sayers writes: *"It is almost impossible to imagine the horror that the citizens of Nagasaki experienced at the dropping of the bomb. At first the flash of light, passing through walls, cars, people, anything. Then the wind, the force of the explosion, erasing a city in a second. There are two aerial images of Nagasaki that you can find easily online. The before shot shows an orderly city with streets and buildings. The second shot, taken after the blast, could be of an empty plain or desert. Yet the damage to buildings was nothing compared to the violence that the blast would inflict on men, women, and children. The fortunate ones were turned to ash in a second. Those within a few miles of the blast were skinned alive. Many victims, surveying the destruction, doubted their own sanity, so horrendous was the carnage. One young woman recalled looking out of her window seconds after the blast. Gone were the houses and buildings, the trees, the grass. All around her were skinned people and mangled bodies. She began to believe that she had literally been transported to hell."*

Takashi survived the blast in a concrete walled portion of the hospital in which he was based. 'Though struggling with a head wound he worked with others to save lives wondering if Midori had also survived. When military doctors arrived to relieve him, Takashi went searching for her and found, to his horror, that

Midori had been reduced by the bomb to a lump of bones and ash in the remains of their kitchen. Heartbroken, he recognised in the bones of her hand the cross of the rosary she used daily in prayer.

In the following days and weeks Takashi continued to care for those who had been injured and burnt and when the Catholic community held an open-air remembrance service in the ruins of Urakami Cathedral he was invited to speak. Astonishingly, Takashi suggested that God had prepared the Catholic community for this tragedy over four centuries of religious persecution. These are some of the words he offered the congregation on that day, *'Happy are those who weep; for they shall be comforted. We must walk the way of reparation... ridiculed, whipped, punished for our crimes, sweaty and bloody. But we can turn our eyes to Jesus carrying his cross up the hill to Calvary... The Lord has given; the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.'*

Through the prophet Isaiah God said to the people of Israel, and to Takashi Nagai in Nagasaki, *'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine! ...When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you...'*

Surely, God continues to say this to us, and to all of humanity, in the midst of pandemic and whatever other challenges we face? Would love to hear your thoughts about that.

But, for now, please join me in a prayer written by the ministry team at Canterbury Cathedral:

Almighty God,
healer of the sick and strength of the weak,
look with mercy on all who suffer at this time.
Bring healing to those who are sick,
bring peace to those who are anxious,
bring strength to those who care for them,
and wisdom to our leaders
that our whole society may journey together through this difficult time
with determination and generosity,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen