Everyone belongs – here is your home

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Epiphany 2020. Isa 60 1-6, Ps 72 1-7, 10-14, Eph 3 1-12, Mt 2 1-12

We've celebrated something very special at our church door this morning: Epiphany is the festival which tells us that God is for everyone. Born as a baby, God offers a hand of trustful, vulnerable, curious invitation to everyone. It doesn't matter who you are, what you think, what you've done – or what you think you've done – God holds out a hand of trust and welcome to you. Epiphany says that God isn't interested in a system of insiders and outsiders. So that means God also wants us to invite – to include, to trust – and not to lock out. *Everyone belongs – here is your home*; this is the Gospel message of Epiphany. *Everyone belongs – here is your home*.

That's a particularly powerful and poignant message today. Belonging and home are such fragile things. We're regularly reminded of this every time we pray for the eighty-five million displaced persons around the planet – people who've been forced to leave the home community they belong to.

But especially in recent days, the horror of their plight has been brought closer to home for us in a way that scientists and emergency-services personnel have predicted for far too long. We have bushfire refugees; we have our own displaced persons – thousands of them, taking refuge at beaches, community halls, ovals, roadhouses – you name it. And there many of them learn that their communities and homes no longer exist. There is no home for them to return to. This tragedy is happening to farm and domestic animals too, and it's happening to native wildlife. Those poor creatures who haven't perished

in the fire have no habitat to belong to now. Home is gone; dead. Some species will even disappear as a consequence.

How does our Gospel message today address this? *Everyone belongs – here is your home*; the Gospel message of Epiphany. What does it call from us? I find it very challenging, but perfectly clear. Those of us who have been spared these tragedies are called to offer whatever support we can to those who need it.

Generally, we do this by getting onto a help-line and making a donation. That's a wonderful thing to do. But are there other possibilities we need to think about?

Many millions of displaced persons around the world – and now in our own back yard – don't have the option of going home. They're forced to find another place to call home. Yet communities willing to adopt these people are hard to find. Few countries or households are willing to share what we call *our place* with strangers. Adoption of any type is a very fraught matter, isn't it; long-term help is very scarce.

Yet this morning we heard that *we've* been adopted. In the reading from Eph 3.6, we heard that we '…Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.' We strangers to the chosen people have been offered adoption into God's family before we even knew we needed it: easy to say, but how do we grasp the wonder of this?

The Epiphany story is one of a displaced family just about to be forced into exile to save their child's life. It speaks to us about the uncertainty of our life. Any moment might lead us out of the world we know; any moment might be our last. I've written this sermon with one ear to the fire reports. Life is uncertain: our links to family, community and even nation can change in an instant. The Epiphany story reminds us of that very forcefully—but why? And what are we meant to do about it?

The trauma people suffer doesn't end when the fire is put out. On-going contact, support and love are essential to people getting their lives back – to belonging, to feeling safe, feeling at home. Thinking of the support we might offer to local people in distress, we've already looked at the option of opening our homes to hills parishioners who need to evacuate the night before a day of catastrophic fire conditions. That's an immediate, short-term, very valuable and practical thing we can do. But there are long-term needs developing right now too. You may not know that there's an ecumenical and indeed multi-faith programme coordinated by the Uniting Church which trains and supervises chaplains to offer on-going support and care for the survivors of disasters. It's well worth considering. https://sa.uca.org.au/disaster-and-recovery-ministries/ But enrolling in that programme is a long-term thing. What if we don't feel we know how to help right now, but would love to roll up our sleeves and do something manageable – how might any of us offer the support we long to give?

A parishioner wrote to me on Friday about one way of doing this. She'd been through the Ash Wednesday fires in the hills as a child, and back then, her family adopted a fire-affected family for a year – in small ways.

As a child, she made cards to send those people, to keep in touch with them for a year or more. Her family sent them gift cards and letters of encouragement. Her grandparents prayed for them, invited them over and helped them with toys for their kids and things like that. Her grandfather also adopted another person who was on their own too; a young person to encourage – so it wasn't just families.

This parishioner who wrote to me wondered if we could set up something like that; to provide a bit of support to those who've lost everything in the fires; a bit like a buddy system and not just to families but to anyone. If many of us did this, it could support a lot of people. Or we might adopt a

small church or parish in any of the places that have been burnt – either in South Australia or interstate. We could make contact through their minister or church council or their central body.

And my correspondent also talked about fundraising to help maintain this support. So please talk about this over morning tea, tell the nearest member of parish council *your* ideas and see what comes of it. It may be this or something else – something small, but a light shining where at present, the only prospect is gloom and pain.

It's important that we discover ways to embody the Gospel vision of the Epiphany – *Everyone belongs – here is your home*. Our calling is to embody God's call which would see light extinguishing darkness, acceptance inviting diversity, and grace welcoming all with love. This may be one way for us to do this. Amen