

The Third Sunday of Creation: Outback-Wilderness Sunday

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Season of Creation 3A Outback-Wilderness Sunday-Joel 1 8-10,
17-20 Ps 18 6-19 Rom 8 18-27 Mt 3 13-4 2

In my last parish, we did something the Archbishop's requiring all parishes to do again now; we worked together to develop a Mission Action Plan – a MAP. This parish well knows that a mission's something you're sent to accomplish. Anyway, we prayed, thought and discussed what God might want us to do. Eventually, it became clear that God's mission for us was to work alongside Aboriginal people. We did this in several ways over following years. One of the upshots of that mission is that Vicky, the girls and I have been adopted into a central desert family in Papunya NT, and one of their daughters in particular is now also our daughter.

When Shekayla came to do her schooling here, Adelaide was quite bewildering for her. We confronted her with a strange wilderness filled with rules and regulations about time, money, strange manners and customs, and endless bureaucracy. Her home languages don't need words for time or number, let alone words to translate our crazy form-filling language; Centrelink, Medicare, bank account applications, and forms for work-experience and school excursions. We're raised in this jungle of expectations and rules. It was all a painful, steep learning curve for Shekayla.

The shoe was on the other foot when we went to visit Papunya with a bunch of young people. Shekayla wanted to show us a rock-hole where Papunya's kids like to swim. We drove out towards the nearby ranges, then the track gave out. So we climbed out onto a very stony, slippery landscape. We had

sturdy shoes on, which was good; the stones on the ground slipped and moved under us, and they were ferociously hot from the sun. But Shekayla and her cousin Tobias didn't bother with shoes. They skipped off ahead of us, absolutely at home in this pathless wilderness, laughing and calling out to each other in the beautiful, bubbly language the Land had given her people over tens of thousands of years. It was a precious vision. We saw children who were fully themselves and completely at one with their ancestral lands; kids we love and care for, but whom we really hardly knew.

The Land and its people in harmony; it's a belonging we're trying to recover during this Season of Creation. Genesis portrays our common origin with all life – Earth as Mother of all living – and also our tragic loss of that belonging. Today St Paul takes the image of Earth our Mother to a new level in Romans 8. Creation is groaning in labour pains, and we're there in the birthing centre with her; yet at the same time, we're in the birth canal – we are to be part of the anticipated, renewed Creation.

Paul reminded us today of the curse which God declared would befall Earth as a consequence of human recklessness. We'd already heard this over the past two weeks in Genesis. Paul goes on to name that curse as creation's bondage to decay. We resonate with the truth of his words as we did with Genesis.

Because we're seeing this curse in action right now, and at a catastrophic level. If we hadn't been plundering the wilderness and making its wild creatures our food, this pandemic and several other of our recent plagues may never have happened.

So we groan with Earth as she endures this abuse. Yet as we've just noticed, Paul hears these groans as something more than the sounds of undeserved agony. When he says they're the cries of Creation in labour, he injects a wonderful hope into the pain. The story's not headed for inevitable tragedy; God

doesn't want it to be like that. New life is summoned from death; new life is revealed as old life reborn to goodness and health. Somehow, as we see in today's Gospel, that's connected with a willingness to endure the isolation and fear of wilderness; a wilderness of unknowing fear, and fearful hope, of hunger and isolation.

It was a good start for us to enter the risky wilderness out beyond Papunya. And it'll probably be better if, next time we're there, we go out one at a time; alone. Being alone with Creation, we discover connections with our deepest selves – and with our Maker. We might even learn to hear the groanings Paul describes: Creation groaning in labour pains; our own groaning as we wait to be born into the fulness of a redeemed, renewed Creation; and the groaning of the Holy Spirit, helping us in our weakness; interceding for us with sighs too deep for words.

Celia Kemp writes, When I first left the big cities for Australia's north someone said 'that's great, you can stay for a year and it will look excellent on your CV'. [The implication was that] successful folk can't spend too long out of the main game. Anywhere else is to be travelled through briefly to mine for experiences that can be used to benefit us back in the real world. 'A packaged tour of the absolute', to steal Annie Dillard's term. ... However if we duck the tour bus mentality and spend long enough in the desert the seemingly unchanging surroundings force a massive change in us. We let go of the illusion that we are somehow more special than others.

Surprisingly, one day, we are even glad to be rid of it. For we are free like we have never been before. Celia Kemp: Into the desert. Day 40

So much about our settled, city lives cuts us off from this. And the support systems we require to keep our ever-more-demanding cities alive are the engine room of the destruction we are wreaking on our world.

Plunge into the [wilderness] beyond your own comprehension ... Bewilderment is the true comprehension. Not to know where you are going is the true knowledge. ... That's the way of the cross. You can't find it yourself, so you must let [God] lead you as though you were a blind person. It's not you, no person, no living creature, but God, who instructs you by word and Spirit in the way you should go. Martin Luther quoted in Bonhoeffer Nachfolge 83 Which way do you hear God calling us? Which wilderness?