

BARMERA - SUNDAY 1 JUNE 2008

Reading: Psalm 46

Practicing the Presence of God

The river flows, beguilingly full,
Mocking the dry land it slowly passes;
Lakes and wetlands cringe.

Dying orchards, withering vines
Mirror the heart-pain of blockers;
Crippling debts rapidly rising.

Empty shopfronts, struggling business,
Blackened teeth in once white smile;
Mocking community life.

Pain and despair, loss of hope,
Families crumbling under strain;
Heralding uncertain future.

Where, O God, are you in this?
Where is your presence to be seen?

I come as a visitor into this place
I see the signs around me of the impact of the water crisis,
and my heart is moved by what I see.

But I come from a different environment, a city environment,
where we, too, feel some of the impact of drought
though nowhere near what you are experiencing
and, at the end of the day, I will go home to my environment.

I come to offer whatever help and hope I can into your lives;
therefore I need to know what are your struggles and your questions
as you live, day by day, in this place.

So tell me, as you attempt to be faithful people of God in this place
what are your questions?
what are the issues of faith and life that you struggle with?

[Sharing time]

I am not going to pretend that I can respond to all that you are asking
or struggling with.

But I want to offer you a hopeful way of working through the questions.

I want to begin with the question that I asked at the end of my opening reflection:
Where is God in this?

And I want to assert that God is present;
but God is not present to any greater or lesser degree than God was
when life was much rosier and richer than it is now.

People become misguided about this in both directions.
Some will try to say that this drought, this water crisis
is a sign of God's disfavour,
that God has somehow withdrawn grace or providence.

This will only lead us into unnecessary guilt about what we have done to offend God,
that somehow the lack of water is God's judgement upon us
for what we have done or not done.

Others will say that, if God is a God of compassion,
then surely the pain of our people, the pain of our communities
is being felt deeply by God and that God would want to be
more present in such places.

This will only lead us into misguided hope,
that God will somehow overcome our difficulties, will heal the land,
and remove all pain from our lives.

God is present - as God always has been and always will be.

If there is a question to be asked, it is really this one:
How is the Christian community a sign of God's presence here?

For that surely is our role as the community of faith,
to be, to live, as deeply as we are able in the presence of God
- and allow that presence to percolate through our life.

As a community, and as its individual members,
we need to reclaim a life of spiritual discipline

of practicing the presence of God,
so that we become the visible presence of God in this place.

I have no doubt that, at the core of your lives, there is a deep faith in God,
a faith founded on the way that we have seen God revealed in Jesus, the Christ
It is there, isn't it?

But just having a faith in God at the core of life is not enough.
Two other aspects need to come into play.

The first is that the core beliefs at the centre of our lives
need to percolate outwards until they fill every fibre of our being,
informing, inflaming, inspiring all our thinking, doing, acting, being,
making a difference to how we view the world,
how we relate to others be they friend, stranger, or enemy
so that our whole lives are authentically Christ-like.

The second is that this core of belief filling every layer of our being
needs to be re-ignited into a newer, deeper love for God,
a bubbling cauldron within us
that cannot help but bubble over into every outward action
and relationship.

The key to this renewed sense of Spirit-filled, Christ-oriented, God-centred living
is the ancient art of spiritual disciplines.

There are many ways that these have been described and practised
throughout the centuries - but all have some threads in common.

There need to be inner disciplines, individual disciplines,
- practices of meditation, prayer, study of Scripture, fasting, and so on
- practices that emphasize and deepen the well of connection
between God and us at the core of our lives.

There need to be outward disciplines,
- practices of simplicity, submission, service, confession and forgiveness
- practices that become visible as the outward expression of our lives
demonstrating that we have a transforming presence within us.

And there need to be corporate disciplines, communal disciplines,
- practices of hospitality, justice, caring, worship and celebration
- practices that invite participation by others in the common life
of God's people, practices that demonstrate that here

is a community in which you may find
the transforming presence of God for your life.

In short we need to be continually re-born as God-centred beings;
we need to be continually re-made as God-enriched communities of faith.

How does this help the wider community around us?

Sheila Cassidy, in her book *Sharing the Darkness*,
offers some images that I find helpful here.



In the first image, the doctor and nurse with all their medical paraphernalia
represent the multitude of helping professions
that offer care in our communities - medical workers, social workers,
government agencies, any person or organisation which offers
practical help that addresses a need.

The faith community has a part in this;
for, in rural communities like this, many of us are those people.
We offer practical help and care, and we do it out of the servant heart
that Jesus has put within us.



In the second image (you will see that the basic posture of the figures is the same)
- in this image, the priest, with sacrament in hand
represents the activity of faith that the church brings to the community
- public worship, both regularly and in special moments,
- days/periods of prayer, etc.

Here the faith community brings its particular vessels of hope and help
and makes them available to anyone in need within the community.



In the third image, we find a deeper level of connection.
here is the place of human care, of pastoral care,
of relating one-to-one with the other, the stranger, the person in need,
listening, attending, counselling, praying, responding.

Here the community of faith puts its human resources
at the disposal of the community.



In the final image we find the two figures naked,
not literally naked, but devoid of all the other resources
except for the authentic human life centred on Christ that is you.

This is a disarming and impotent situation to be in

but represents the deepest, most authentic understanding of what it means
for us to be the presence of God to another human being in pain.

In the end,

- we cannot make the rain fall nor the river run more deeply;
 - we cannot save the livelihoods of those who depend on its water
to nurture their crops, nor the business suffering in our towns;
- we cannot create new jobs, heal broken relationships, nor cure depression;
 - we cannot put broken lives back together.

What we can do, as our gift to the people of this community,

- is to live our lives as deeply as humanly possible in God;
 - to consciously nurture that well within us;
 - to live authentically as we are able as followers of Christ;
- and to offer ourselves, without pretension,
as bearers of God's presence
to any who would find hope in deepening that presence
with in their own life.

Let us take a moment to ponder what that means for us in our lives.

[Silent reflection]

Hymn 28 "God is our help and refuge"