BERRI – SUNDAY 3 AUGUST 2008

Lectionary readings:
Genesis 32:3-31
Matthew 14:13-21

Sharing God's Abundance

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 questions that I asked at the end of my opening reflection:
Where is God in this? Where is God's presence to be seen?

I want to assert that God is present,
God is here in the midst of all that your communities are experiencing;
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that God has somehow withdrawn grace or providence.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 magically 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?
And what do we have to offer our people, our communities?

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

Our Bible readings this morning provide us both with a challenge and a hope
as we face this task.

In the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures
we have another episode in the life and times of Jacob.

Here, he is on his way back to reconcile with his estranged twin brother Esau.
He believes this is what God requires of him
- but he is fearful and mistrusting of Esau.

So first he sends gifts, huge gifts
of goats and sheep and camels and cattle and donkeys and servants
all to appease Esau's presumed anger and win his favour.

And then, on the last night before he must encounter Esau face to face,
he sends his whole family, wives, children, flocks, possessions
and puts them all on the far side of the river, on Esau's side
(literally saying to Esau that he can have them all)
- but he stays alone on the his side of the river.

That night, as I'm sure we all know, as Jacob tries to sleep,
comes a man, a figure, who wrestles with Jacob all night long.
[No beauty sleep for him before his big appointment with Esau!]

And, at the end of that night, three things happen:
- Jacob is given a new name, a new identity
- he is blessed by the stranger and realises
that he has actually been wrestling with God
- he is left with a limp, an imperfection
by which he will remember this encounter.

There is challenge and hope here for us.
The challenge is, that we need to wrestle honestly with God

about what God is calling us to be, about what God is calling us to do,
as the people of God in this time and this place.

The hope is threefold:
- we are given a new name, a new identity in Christ
which we carry within us
- we are blessed by the continuing presence within us of God's Spirit
- and we carry a limp as reminder
that we are imperfect vessels of God's presence.

The other reading, our Gospel story,
[so well presented to us this morning?]
is so familiar that it hardly needs explanation.

But it underlines the truth that God takes whatever meagre offerings we present
and turns them into an abundance to meet the needs of others
- and this offers us both challenge and hope.

The challenge here is this:
Just what are we offering to God to use out of the blessings of our lives?
How much are we prepared to give for God to use?

And the hope is this:
Whatever we offer to God, God will use and turn it to abundance
- whatever we offer, God will do more with it than we can ever think is possible
- whatever we hope for, God will respond to
in richer, deeper ways than we can imagine.

This then is what we offer as the community of faith in this place.

A people who continue to wrestle with God to know God's path for our lives
A people who bear the new name and new identity of Christ
A people blessed by God's ever-present Spirit deep within us

Yet nevertheless, an imperfect people
who trust that God will take the meagreness of our lives and offerings
and, through us, provide abundantly for the needs of those we serve.

Sheila Cassidy, in her book *Sharing the Darkness*,
offers some images that I find helpful to reflect on this.

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

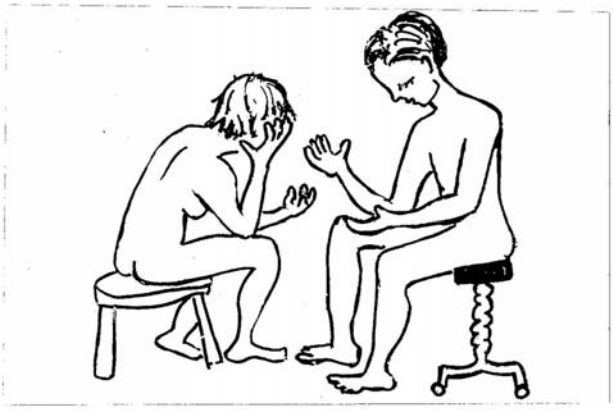
the community

- public worship, both regularly and in special moments,
- days/periods of prayer, helping people through grief, 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
trusting that, through us, God will make a difference
in the lives of others in our community.

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"