

St Nicholas' Anglican Church, Mordialloc, Sunday 5th January, 2020 (Epiphany of our Lord)

Revd Dr Sharne Rolfe, Vicar

Readings:

Isaiah 60:1-6

Ps 72:1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our hearts are heavy today as we gather together to pray for those who have been affected by the devastating, catastrophic bush fires both here in Victoria and in other regions of Australia. Those who live and work in the affected regions, those who were visiting them on holidays, those who have been fighting the fires and providing so many of the much-needed emergency support services have all been terribly impacted by these traumatic events. Lives have been lost, homes, businesses and outbuildings gutted. God's beautiful creation, the land and the animals, are being destroyed. Some of us have friends and family directly impacted. Calls for prayers and practical help have gone out, and people have responded generously, as I know our community will respond generously, today and in the days and weeks ahead. It can all seem a bit surreal, particularly for those of us whose experience of the fires has been through the television coverage. We sit in the comfort of our suburban homes, yet not far from us at all, our fellow Australians are enduring the most unimaginable terror. And we wonder: what can I do to help?

I have been asking that question on behalf of this parish of a number of people these past few days. And the answer I am receiving from pretty much every quarter is that at the moment the most immediate need - in addition to prayer - is for money, to be given to relief agencies so that they have the funds they need to provide the front-line relief that is urgent, right now. So today the Wardens and I have decided that we will take up a special collection during the final hymn, the proceeds of which will go to the Anglicare relief efforts. If you wish to make an additional personal

contribution, details of various relief agencies, including the Red Cross and the Salvation Army, are provided in an email sent to you yesterday from me. We are also making further enquiries of Kingston Council to determine how best we can offer support to them, ensuring that what we do is used optimally to help those in need at this time.

Church communities throughout the Diocese of Gippsland are very much in our thoughts and prayers today. Yesterday I received a copy of the Pastoral letter which will be read out today at parishes throughout Gippsland. Written by The Right Reverend Dr Richard Treloar, Bishop of Gippsland, I thought you might also want to hear what he says, and that it might be helpful for us all as we seek solace and comfort at this time of Epiphany, when so many are hurting.

Bishop Teloar writes:

“St Paul reminds us that when one member of the body suffers, all the members of the body suffer with it (1 Cor 12:26), and so it is for all of us in these anxious and dark days ... We acknowledge our feelings of helplessness in the face of such ferocious forces, notwithstanding the power of prayer, which has been keenly and gratefully felt by those in harm’s way. We pay tribute to the work of our emergency services, the CFA, and associated organisations whose workers and volunteers have helped others keep safe ... In the body of Christ we are never alone.”

In the body of Christ we are never alone. What words of comfort these are at any time of trauma in our lives. Times of trauma often make us feel very alone. We may feel nobody really understands, or we may feel sometimes that we are so lost, things are so dark, that there is no-one who can help us. But, in the body of Christ we are never alone. Today we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord. Our second reading, from the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians, is an interesting one to consider in the light of what we are experiencing today. Paul writes about the eternal purpose of God that God carried out in Christ Jesus.

What is the essence of this eternal purpose of God, carried out in Christ Jesus? Well we have a most important insight into this in the visit of the Wise Men to the infant Jesus. The story, as told in our Gospel from Matthew this morning, begins with what we might consider the usual trappings of power and privilege as the world usually understands them. The setting is Jerusalem, that great ancient city and seat of power and influence. The key players in the beginning of the story are men

of power and influence: the Wise Men from the East, rich men, bearing expensive gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh; and King Herod, a man so influential that he can successfully call together all the Chief Priests and scribes on a whim. Herod, we learn in Matthew's story, is feeling incredibly threatened by the news of a child born who is king of the Jews. He seeks, by fair means and foul, to find out where the child is, this child of whom Herod is so frightened, who poses such a threat to his power.

And what do the Wise Men find when the star they are following finally stops over that unlikely outpost of Bethlehem? They find the antithesis of threat, the antithesis of power as the world understands it, as Herod understands it. They find a baby in his mother's arms. And, we are told, in their wisdom they recognise greatness in this simple scene and they kneel down and pay Jesus homage. They have, we are told, a great epiphany. But what exactly is this epiphany, this new insight with the power to change their lives?

That great Anglican theologian Rowan Williams has described being invited into the stable to see the Christ child as like being invited into the engine room of a great ocean liner. For here, in this stable, the Wise Men (and all of us really) get to gaze upon the engine room of God. We get to see up close and personal how God works, what the "power" of God really is. The entire system of the Universe, what Paul called in Ephesians the mystery of God, is laid bare, is revealed for us here in this small bundle of newborn flesh cradled in his mother's arms in a stable. We meet the mystery of the all-powerful, all-majestic God, as God really is - not in trumpeting splendour, not in clouds of glory. But in vulnerability, poverty, simplicity, weakness - everything Herod and so many people try so hard not to be.

The mystery revealed is that God's greatness, God's power, does not, never has and never will reside in that which the world identifies as powerful. God, in the baby Jesus, has given himself away so completely that we meet him in a bundle of shivering new-born flesh. God acts not by manipulating things to be the winner over others who become losers as a result. God acts not by creating situations of fear, so that others are frightened into giving way. God acts by giving away, not by accumulating; by love not by fear. As Rowan Williams writes, the great epiphany is that "the Universe lives by a love that refuses to bully us, or force us; (by) the love of the cradle and the cross." (Christmas sermon, Canterbury Cathedral, 25/12/2004).

I'd like to finish by sharing with you a prayer that has been sent to all clergy this week by our Acting Vicar General. It is the prayer that has been said these past days at St Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne.

Almighty God and heavenly Father, we pray for this world that you love so much that you sent your Son Jesus to be born as the child of Bethlehem:

We pray for the safety of those sheltering from fires and those fighting fires, for livestock, native animals, paddocks, bushlands and sacred places.

We remember our own loved ones and those who are dear to us facing this crisis. We pray for those tending to the injured, the frightened and the broken-hearted, for emergency services, emergency broadcasters, chaplains and counsellors.

We ask for your forgiveness for our own failures in safeguarding your good creation, and pray for political and community leaders, and all those responding to the current crisis in our nation.

Above all, we pray for the peace that passes all understanding, in our nation and state, in our homes and in our hearts.

This we ask in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

+In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.