

27 October 2013

It has been a very heart-breaking few days watching the rolling coverage of the bushfire crisis in New South Wales; emergency services deployed from around the country, many homes lost, people on edge and residents evacuated from nursing homes. The sheer scale of the drama is a little difficult to comprehend. And, like many people, I kept saying myself, 'But it's only October and not even summer yet. What will things be like at the height of summer?' As a community of faith, we pray for those who have lost their homes, we pray for those who fight the fires, we pray for those in need, we pray for some easing in conditions and that nature not unleash its full fury.

We pray at various times for various things. Today's gospel gives us a very valuable lesson in how God hears the prayers of those truly humble. The Pharisee was a man full of pride and judgmental who held others in contempt. He basically stands in the temple and says, 'Lord, thank goodness that I am not like these people'. The tax collector, at some distance away, seems reluctant to even raise his eyes for fear of being recognized. The tax collector basically beats his chest and says, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner'. According to Jesus, it is the tax collector who goes home at rights with God. Why? Because the Pharisee has exalted himself and this is all empty show. But the tax collector has humbled himself and now is exalted in the eyes of God.

Technically, in the eyes of God, the Pharisee had done all that the Law required of him. He performed all his religious duties as required. But he lacked one key ingredient in his life – a humble disposition. The tax collector, conscious of his status as someone despised, beats his chest and admits his sinfulness. His life is transformed by God's forgiving grace. The scriptures make clear over and over again that God is always on the side of the poor, the broken, the needy, the marginalized. This is precisely where God's grace is at work in people's lives drawing them forward in hope, setting them free, filling them with the light and joy of Jesus. This is a message constantly repeated by Pope Francis; in fact, he is a witness to this. According to Pope Francis, the hope, joy and healing of God is not found in theology books but in daily life, in family life and in the life and ministry of the parish. (Incidentally, I read on the internet during the week that such is the pope's popularity in Italy that

Francesco has shot to the top of the list as the most popular boy's name!).

In today's first reading from the Old Testament, we read how the Lord is no respecter of personages, that is, he does not listen to people according to their position in society. In fact, the Lord turns deliberately to the poor, the orphan and the widow; he is close to the broken-hearted. How many times on our television screens here in Australia do we see the broken-hearted standing in front of the remains of their family home destroyed by bushfires, or seeing homes washed away in massive floods, who say 'the only possessions I have left are the clothes I am standing in?' According to the first reading, the humble person's prayer literally pierces the clouds, driving up to God to be heard. And so, there is great truth in today's psalm which is the foundation of all that the bible teaches – the Lord hears the cry of the poor. When this prayer pierces the clouds, God is attentive, the prayer of the needy reaches into the very life of God. God is moved, God loves, God hears and God responds. Unless we are witnesses to this and truly believe it, the bible is simply a collection of fairy tales.

Every time the word of God is broken open for us, we are part of its unfolding story; we are invited into the story of the God who is not detached from the pain of his people. Over and over again, we are moved by the story of God who hears and responds in love and we too are called to do the same. We are called to hear God's word and to respond in love. As a people of faith, we gather to celebrate the God who truly hears the cry of the poor.