

Lent One - 1 March 2009

I remember a number of years ago, standing in what is now the dry sand bed of Lake Mungo out in the extreme west of New South Wales. Before it dried up about 14,000 years ago, the lake covered 135 square kilometres and was about 10 metres deep.

The area was prolific with fish and wildlife and supported a large population of people from about 40,000 years ago. In fact amongst the many human artefacts found, have been flake tools and sandstone grinders, suggesting that the people living there may have been amongst the first to grind flour, using seeds from the wild grasses.

Yet these people lived but yesterday compared with our more ancient antecedents.

What may be the oldest human footprints in the world have been discovered in Africa. Prof. John Harris of Rutgers University has announced the discovery of 1.5 million year old prints. These prints reveal that our ancient ancestors walked like us and had modern looking foot. One of the seven footprints shows an individual about 175 centimetres tall standing with legs astride, before moving slowly across what would have been a muddy, slippery surface. -The discovery by Prof John Harris of Rutgers University in New Jersey said they were made by Homo erectus, the precursor of our own species, Homo sapiens.

I think sometimes, as we get so caught up in our modern arguments and disputes, we ought to stop and just reflect just what a small part of humanity we are.

Today we began our readings in Genesis, with a short part of the story of Noah.(Gen 9:8-17)

The earliest written records of what we count as the Old Testament began to emerge just 900 years before Jesus, but refer to events far, far further back. Till these stories started to be written down, they were passed on in oral form, often as poems, and in some we find links to older cuneiform records from Sumerian and other earlier civilisations.

Thinking about these early readings is one of the ways we can get ourselves caught up in arguments. The biblical literalists, for example, will say that these represent actual events, liberals would say that they are just stories.

I think, though that if we get caught up in these arguments we waste time and energy and completely miss the point of what the Holy Scriptures are saying to us.

Before what we call the “enlightenment”, which dates from not much more that a couple of centuries ago, people had no access to scientific knowledge that we today take for granted. They created myths and stories to give explanation. We all know some of the aboriginal myths in our own country.

All the ancient cultures have similar myths explaining life and its meaning. In many of the records, including Hindu, Greek and Sumerian ancient writings, there are mythological

stories of great floods by which the gods had destroyed civilisations, often in retribution to evil deeds. .

For me there is something uniquely different in the accounts of Noah.

What is amazing though, to me, about the Noah's Ark account of the flood, is the sophistication of the thought. At that time the religions were nature religions and saw the gods as part of, not apart from, the world. The Bible reveals the One God who seeks and encounters humanities and enters into covenant with the earth's children.: In fact the Noah stories can be seen as a demythologisation of the ancient stories as they tell of the encounter the One God who is beyond creation, with that creation.. I see the Spirit of God at work transforming these ancient stories into revolutionary new understandings of God as One and as the world as the creation of God.

The central point for us today in the Noah story is the earliest biblical record of covenant. God, the God of all, enters into covenant with us, and for what? Let the Scriptures speak:

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10 and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. 11 I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

In place of the gods of the civilisations from which the Jewish people emerged, the gods had to be placated, were frequently capricious, often vengeful. Here is this text we hear of the One God who establishes a covenant with the world of God's creation not to capriciously destroy it..

The humanity is all people, not a particular religious group or faith or persuasion.

As in each of the covenants recorded in the Scriptures, there is a physical sign chosen: the rainbow – which shines in the sky over all people when the rain has finished: how perfect a symbol.

It has been my policy not to criticise the views of other churches publicly, because we have different perspectives and understandings in the way we, as Christians, worship God in the Lord Jesus Christ. However, I have been so utterly appalled at the words of some of the extreme Christian groups and their use of the media to promulgate their utterly fallacious interpretation, that I have decided to speak out.

It is one of the gravest heresies, I believe, when Christians are heard to say that God destroys life: As Christians we say that the world is God's gift to us; it has its own time, space, climate, it is subject to scientific rules which we would affirm came from the mind of God. In our scientific world, we can understand so much more of the whys and wherefore's of the natural world than could our pre-scientific brothers and sisters.

As God led the Jewish people to reinterpret previous mythological explanations of their time, in ways that reveal the mystery and wonder of the God of all who seeks humanity, who encounters us, enters into covenant with us, so this same God challenges us to use the

knowledge we have of the universe and of the world and seek to understand, protect and preserve the world.

There have, unfortunately, been Christians of some denominations quick to claim that the horrific devastation of the fires is a result of God “withdrawing his protection over Victoria” because of legislation passed by the Victorian Parliament. (see footnote) – I find this the most appalling misuse of the Christian faith. I fail to understand how anyone who claims to believe in the Christian God of love, could somehow suggest that to punish lawmakers, who no doubt have by and large escaped the ravages of the fires, God should allow such untold suffering on so many people, young and old.

Of course it is easy enough to misuse the Holy Bible, to produce a few words from here, a quote from there is in the Scriptures to justify such ideas – for the something in the bible can be found to justify almost any position.

We live in a world which uses science to control the world, and in many ways we are able to do so : air conditioned houses, cars that we can rely on, medical science that gives us years of health and life that previous generations knew nothing of, just a few examples, of the scientific, engineering and technological developments that have changed the way we live.

But some of the forces of nature are vast beyond our imagining and, at this stage at least, our control. The fires in Victoria are a horrific example of that: a drought that has gone on for months and even years, days of extreme heat, ferocious winds – all came together three weeks ago and now there are, we are told, even after that vast destruction, still 1100 kms of fire front and days of threat ahead. We can argue how much humans are responsible: the role of arsonists, the questions of climate change, but we are dealing still, our human interference apart, with forces we are unable to control, but which are part of the natural world.

God gives us this world, with all its time and space, and our minds to learn to use, control and keep our planet. And where do we see God in all this devastating tragedy? We see God’s Holy Spirit bubbling up in the courage and fortitude of fire fighters and people fighting for their own homes, we see God’s Spirit in the research, innovations, developments that provides equipment to fight the fires, and we see God’s Spirit in compassion, generosity, sheer hard work, to find ways to help in this devastating situation. Indeed, the God who enters into covenant with us is the God who strengthens and challenges us to use our hearts and minds to meet such dreadful tragedies, to overcome and to go on.

Today in the Gospel we hear of Jesus at his baptism.

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.(Mark 1:9-12)

This is the turning point in the life of Jesus. Here is beginning of the ministry of Jesus, a ministry which will last just three years, as he strives to show the immediacy of the presence of God, whom he calls “Abba”, “Father,” as he teaches, heals, comforts, challenges those whom he encounters. The road ahead from the Baptism is the way that leads to the Cross and Resurrection. We have just six weeks ahead in Lent as we too, seek to see how God challenges us to follow the way of Jesus.

In Jesus we see ushered in the New Covenant between God and humanity as all who are baptised are challenged to live as Christ did, praying and working that God's kingdom may come.

The Jewish people took the myths from cultures around them, and demythologised them to let the relationship of the One God shine through. God was able to work through them to reveal God's own Oneness, and love for all.

We in our time must allow the Spirit of God to lead us into new understandings of what he calls us to be and to do today, to use the tools at our disposal to work for safety, security, peace, opportunity and hope for all, and to witness to the love of God by the quality of our lives.

And let us not shirk from the challenges God lays before us as we seek how we are called to share the light, life, goodness and love of Jesus Christ in our time and place.

Beatrice Pate

1 March 2009

1. Sydney Morning Herald Article

[Pastor's abortion dream inflames bushfire tragedy](#)

by Rick Feneley February 11, 2009 - 2:57PM

The Catch the Fire Ministries has tried to blame the bushfires disaster on laws decriminalising abortion in Victoria.

The Pentecostal church's leader, Pastor Danny Nalliah, claimed he had a dream about raging fires on October 21 last year and that he woke with "a flash from the Spirit of God: that His conditional protection has been removed from the nation of Australia, in particular Victoria, for approving the slaughter of innocent children in the womb".