

Here we are in Epiphany again...we go through familiar readings... maybe through familiar territory in commentary. This week it's the brief account of the Baptism of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. I wonder what you hear in this reading. Perhaps you contemplate your own baptism. Perhaps you bring questions to this reading. Perhaps you wonder what 21st century epiphanies should look like. Have we seen the heavens part, or heard a divine Voice thundering through the clouds? How might we bridge the gap between an ancient Voice and a modern silence?

In this narrative, Jesus approaches John to be baptized, and John objects, "I need to be baptized by you!" (Mt. 3:14) Jesus' responds: "It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt. 3:15). Surely Jesus had already fulfilled all righteousness? Eugene Peterson, interpreting this passage in The Message translation of the Bible, captures the meaning well: "God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism." In his baptism Jesus was making a public declaration that he was going to take the side of God's justice. He was going to set about promoting God's work of righting the wrongs and lifting burdens from the oppressed. He was going to shine the light of God's truth into all the dark places of the world. By sharing Jesus' baptism we have taken on the same calling as his - to shine the light of God's truth and God's peace and God's compassion and God's mercy - in short, the light of God's justice - into all the dark places of our world.

Alongside my preparation for this morning, my attention, probably much like yours, has been on the bushfires, the devastating vast areas of land, the tragic loss of life, the destruction of homes and livelihoods, and a mind boggling loss of vegetation and wildlife. At its height, tens of thousands of people had been evacuated from their homes. Some of you might have notice that Jakarta has had severe flooding with dozens of deaths. Flash floods and landslides have displaced more than 36,000 in Jakarta and nearby provinces. The impacts of climate change is causing the capital city to sink so quickly that officials are working to move it to another island. Some of you might know that Puerto Rico has been hit by a 6.4 magnitude earthquake – and 950 smaller ones – in the first 10 days of January 2020. Roughly two-thirds of Puerto Rico remains without electricity, many people still don't have water and frightened residents were staying outside. I could go on. Like so many of you, I have felt the weight of sorrow and grief with so much disaster and destruction.

There's been an incredible outpouring of generosity in response to the bushfires in Australia, both from the Australian and international community, and wonderful stories about practical help provided. Integrated into the emergency response has been the largest scale disaster chaplaincy response on record. Uniting Church ministers and members have been playing a key role in the coordination of pastoral support and serving alongside ecumenical and interfaith colleagues as chaplains. Let me share just a sample of the stories.

Rev Terence Corkin, the former General Secretary of the Uniting Church Assembly, lives on the south coast of NSW. When his own house was threatened by the bushfires, he evacuated his family and then returned to help out in an evacuation centre that provided safe shelter. Terence put in 7 days straight at the centre, which served and 4000 meals across dinner and lunch. Terence is among 55 chaplains of various denominations who have been working at 34 different evacuation centres and disaster assistance points for the NSW bushfires this year. These chaplains have given unceasing comfort, blessing and support to evacuees, other agencies' volunteers and fearful local residents in the face of great threat. These extraordinary pastoral volunteers have become an important part of the fabric of emergency welfare, and provide crucial emotional support. Terence spoke to a number of people in the centre whose homes had been lost to fire. His designated role was 'emotional support' including spiritual support if that's what people needed. "The chaplaincy presence was incredibly well received by people," he said. "People would say, 'I'm so glad you're here'." There was a lot of care going on. Terence said, "You meet people at their point of need, they set the agenda - I don't go in saying, 'now how can I get God into the conversation?'. Often it was just making conversation and a connection, even just to change the mood for five minutes. There were also some very significant conversations, and people could say I really feel much better now. Some people were asking "what is the foundation of my life if I lose everything?". Crises are a catalyst for people to work through core questions, about what's really important to people.

Many Uniting Church congregations have opened their doors to community members in fire-affected areas. One of those was Batemans Bay Uniting Church on the NSW South Coast.

The church provided shelter when other evacuation points were full or could not be accessed. Retired minister Rev. Yvonne Stevenson said 100 people came through the doors and 40 slept the night inside the Church. "We have soft pews, so we were able to turn them around and make a double bed out of them." Families with special needs were accommodated inside the Church's squash courts, including a family with a child with autism. Another family came with a child on a hospital bed needing aspiration every hour. Space was found for them and the medical equipment was recharged at the local hospital. A third family came with four chicken eggs about to hatch and a rooster. Yvonne said help came from many places, both within the church and the wider community. "Literally thousands of people have been displaced. It is impossible to be there for all of them, but we can be there with some of them."

In Victoria, the chaplaincy effort co-ordinated by the Victorian Council of Churches deployed almost 200 volunteers in the last couple of weeks in 12 relief centres, supporting more than 2000 people.

In this State, where fire has devastated communities in the Adelaide Hills and on Kangaroo Island, two new short term, part-time ministry placements have been established to support recovering communities. Rev. Matt Curnow will be commissioned this afternoon as a part-time Disaster Recovery Pastor to support Uniting Church congregations in the Adelaide Hills, where fire has destroyed 84 homes and caused extensive property damage. Disaster and Recovery Ministries Co-ordinator in the South Australian Synod, Wendy Perkins, said the focus of the placement was to provide pastoral care for congregations at this difficult time, but also to help church members to support their friends and neighbours. One of the local ministers, Rev. Geoff Hurst from Balhannah Uniting Church, and part of the Music on Flinders team here at Pilgrim, said many people in those communities were feeling overwhelmed by all that has happened around them. "Churches in this area have very strong connections that cross over different boundaries in our community. There is a very strong sense of prayerful attention – people wanting to pray for those who have been affected." Rev. Dr Phil Marshall will fill a second placement on Kangaroo Island in a similar role but with a focus on the wider community as local ministers give their energy to pastorally support the congregation. Both placements have been funded by the UCA SA Relief Fund, initially for one month. The recovery from these bushfires will go on for months and years; in many ways it is never complete. There will be many opportunities to support people across our state in pastoral, practical and financial ways during this time.

Our neighbours, U City - built on the old Maughan Uniting Church site, has made available Accessible Serviced Apartments at no charge for people affected by the current bushfire crisis and requiring temporary accommodation during this devastating period.

These are just a small sample of stories of the Uniting Church in action. But I want to honour also the countless stories of generosity from our ecumenical friends, and from people of all cultures and faith traditions, here in Australia and also overseas. The world's religions have one common call: to serve others. When people of faith unite around this shared value, they strengthen the public fabric.

Rev. Jim Wallis, known to many through the Sojourners publication, has a saying: "Faith is personal, but never private." I like to include this in the baptism liturgy. When religion is seen as only a private individual affair, we ignore the important public elements of faith. There is nothing more personal than when people are connected with one another, serve each other, support each other, pray with and for each other. Our Christian discipleship calls us to identify with the situation of all humanity, not into distinction, differentiation, separation and privatisation. Baptism does not take the baptized from the world. Rather, the world becomes the place where we fulfill our Christian vocation, following the example of Jesus.

As our values and priorities gradually align with the reign of God, so we will be led to work to protect the life and dignity of all people and to care for God's creation here on earth. It is the public face of a personal faith and we all have our part to play in prayerful and practical ways.

Thanks be to God. Amen.