

Sunday 12 January 2020
The Baptism of Our Lord
**Sermon preached by The Rev'd John Deane
at the 10am Orchestral Mass**

As we gather this Sunday it is still hard to move beyond the current reality and impact of fire, which afflicts much of our nation. While temperatures have dropped and the quality of air has improved in some places, the fires still rage

To this, today we are further invited by the cycle of our readings to add a story which invokes water, a much-needed, perhaps even precious commodity for many of us at this time.

Fire and water!

Regarded in many cultures as primal elements.

Both powerfully evocative symbols with an ability to stir deep memories and even instincts.

When I was about twelve years old, my family owned a small property on the banks of the Hawkesbury River, not far from the town of Wiseman's Ferry. It contained a modest citrus orchard and, more important to me, a number of small river beaches, well suited for the then popular sport of water skiing. I spent many enjoyable weekends there, especially in the summertime.

However, one particularly hot and oppressive night, I remember being woken up, together with my two siblings, by my mother, with considerable urgency. She told us to get dressed quickly into our swimwear. This seemed a bit crazy to us, but it was clear that it was not a time for questions.

We dressed and left by the back door. As we walked out, we thought we had overslept! It was bright, almost like daylight and we realised that the small mountain across the road from our property was on fire. The memory of that sight is still etched in my mind. The glowing and redness of the burning – everything alight and being consumed. The intensity of the heat – scorching and so dry, with every particle of moisture sucked out. Then the smell – ash and eucalypt and finally – fear

We ran down to the river as fast as we could. I recall that we stood for a moment on the edge of our small pier before jumping into the water. It was dark and cold and strangely, comforting. It even gave us some sense of safety.

We remained in the water for several hours. Slowly fear of what might also be in the water, especially the large eels, began to lessen our enthusiasm. My mother, as I learned later, was more fearful of what might come and join us in the water, snakes.

As morning dawned my father was able to return – he had been helping volunteers down river and had been unable to get back to us. The orchard, all the sheds, several speed

boats had all been lost, but the house had only been singed in places. We had been extremely fortunate – others were not so lucky.

Today we remember those who are grieving and have lost so much, and we remember our land, our bushland with all its flora and fauna.

Fire and water – ancient symbols of the giving of life and death, of purification and renewal. Symbols which have come to be closely identified with the practice of baptism. In today's gospel account it is baptism by water

And so, let us leave one small story of deliverance and enter into the greater story of Jesus.

He comes to be baptised by the prophet John, who protests that it is not necessary. John's baptism was about repentance – why then was it necessary for Jesus to be baptized?

But Jesus puts aside the protest with what to our ears might seem somewhat oblique words: "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness."

While this statement may not seem to provide much of an answer, it is enough for John, for he concedes the point and proceeds to baptise Jesus.

Now much in this account depends on the word, righteousness, which does not regularly form part of our everyday vocabulary. Yet it does feature prominently in Scripture, primarily in describing the relationship existing between human beings and God.

Thinking and acting in a way which is committed and faithful to the relationship with God. This, indeed, is what God through the centuries had sought from God's people, but with little and no lasting success.

However, here in the baptism of Jesus there is recognition that at last one has come, who can and will fulfil this vocation. Jesus now willingly enters into the relationship with God, taking upon himself all its responsibilities and consequences.

In doing so human hope now becomes vested in this one person who lives fully and perfectly into the relationship with God and there is in and through Jesus an invitation to all of us as individuals and communities to make this our story as well.

But let's explore this relationship with God a little bit more. Jesus himself later sums it up as being lived out through two great commandments, which are probably familiar to most of us.

The first to love God totally – body, mind and spirit. Definitely, and emphatically, to be expressed through worship – giving back to God, the Creator, creativity and beauty, as we do today in this wonderful mass setting by Heinrich Biber.

Also, let me suggest, by allowing God to be God, by not seeking to create idols or images of a God that suits our needs and makes us comfortable. A God, who we believe we can contain or control, is an illusion.

But rather to leave ourselves open, as indeed was Jesus, to the calling of God's Spirit and so grow in righteousness. Practically, this has many implications but let me suggest one.

In this ancient land, we are blessed with the deep spirituality of those who have been custodians of this place, for generations beyond count. Can we learn from them to become better stewards of the creation entrusted to us?

And the second commandment – to love the other unselfishly, to love one's neighbour as one's self. This is not a commandment about I, me and mine but about we, us, and ours. It is about how we build our communities, societies and even nations. It calls for hospitality and compassion, reconciliation and justice. And these are not to be limited to times of disaster or crisis and to those with whom I directly interact but are to be practised continually and in response to both friend and stranger alike.

Moreover, it is not only about human beings but once more our vision needs to be bigger! How do we control ambition and greed and live in peace with each other and in harmony with the creation which has been entrusted to all of us?

These are questions we can no longer avoid

“Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.”

The fire had hardly burnt out before argument arose about what to do with the small mountain. Clear it and develop it or preserve it as forest. Fortunately, even at that time there were wise voices which recognised the need to be preserve the watershed – the forest won and exists to this day!

Shortly after the mountain burnt, rain came and within two weeks there were glimpses of green and brown among the still blackened trunks and earth. However, the gum and melaleuca trees, which had lost all grandeur, remained no more than burnt out stumps.

Three months later, with the gift of more rain, regeneration and rebirth was everywhere to be seen. From the stumps, shoots, even stems were now appearing, and these great trees were already on the way back to their well-deserved prominence within the bushland.

Strangely, that experience has left me with a fascination for gum trees. In my travels I have found them transported from Australia to many places around the world. They thrive in the harshest of climates and their resilience is amazing, but above all - to see them brings me hope and reminds me that what seems dead can come back to life.