

Homily for people and parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 12th January 2025, Epiphany 1

Readings: **Isaiah 43:1-7**

Acts 8:14-17

Psalm 29

Luke 3:15-22

This week we're going to touch base with the Hebrew speaking prophet Isaiah, bring to mind the life of a Japanese Saint, before landing back in the context of wildfires and personal faith. Such is the nature of our time!

Through the prophet Isaiah God said to the people of Israel, *'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine!'* And, as if that was not enough reassurance, he continued, *'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you...'*

As Christians we tend to think that the promise and prophecy of Isaiah was not just for the Jewish community, for whom it was originally written, but for all who follow Christ. Let's be honest, it's hugely comforting to think of God being with us as we work through the challenges that are an inevitable part of life.

These challenges can include relationship breakdown, redundancy, and bereavement; they can include injury, illness, and disease. As many of you know, I am currently working with the recent challenge of a kidney cancer diagnosis, but have a clear sense of God's grace in the journey being travelled.

Lifting our eyes from our own situation and concerns – as the news cycle often challenges us to do – I wonder how the people of Los Angeles are going in the journey they currently travel with wildfires?

SBS News reported yesterday that, *'Entire neighbourhoods have been destroyed, more than 180,000 people have been evacuated, and five wildfires continue to burn...'* More than 10,000 homes have been destroyed and Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna said, *"It looks like an atomic bomb dropped in these areas. I don't expect good news..."* from the human remains detection teams.

'Fear not for I am with you!' God says a number of times through the prophet Isaiah... while, *'Remember, I am with you always...'* are the last words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 28:20). *'I am with you always...'* in the midst of plenty and the midst of famine; in the midst of peace and the midst of war; in the midst of flooding rains, and the midst of wildfires.

Takashi Nagai was a medical scientist working in Nagasaki. His specialist area was radiography, but because of exposure to radiation through his research, he was diagnosed with leukemia in 1944.

Takashi and his wife, Midori, were active members of the Catholic community in Nagasaki which had been established in the Sixteenth Century. Consequently, they drew strength from the promise that God would be with them in the difficult days of Takashi's illness.

However, on the sixth of August 1945, a B-29 bomber dropped an atomic bomb on the industrial city of Hiroshima, which destroyed five square miles of the city and killed an estimated eighty thousand people. Alarmed by this news Takashi and Midori sent their son and daughter away from Nagasaki to stay with their grandmother.

Soon after they had left, **a second B-29 bomber dropped a more powerful atomic bomb on Nagasaki with the American air crew using the steeple of Urakami Catholic Cathedral to guide their bomb run.**

Australian writer, Mark Sayers, affirms that: *"It is almost impossible to imagine the horror that the citizens of Nagasaki experienced at the dropping of the bomb. At first the flash of light, passing through walls, cars, people, anything. Then the wind, the force of the explosion, erasing a city in a second. There are two aerial images of Nagasaki that you can find easily online. The before shot shows an orderly city with streets and buildings. The second shot, taken after the blast, could be of an empty plain or desert. Yet the damage to buildings was nothing compared to the violence that the blast would inflict on men, women, and children. The fortunate ones were turned to ash in a second. Those within a few miles of the blast were skinned alive. Many victims, surveying the destruction, doubted their own sanity, so horrendous was the carnage. One young woman recalled looking out of her window seconds after the blast. Gone were the houses and buildings, the trees, the grass. All around her were skinned people and mangled bodies. She began to believe that she had literally been transported to hell."*¹

Takashi Nagai survived the blast in a concrete walled portion of the hospital in which he was based. 'Though struggling with a head wound, he worked with others to save lives wondering if Midori had also survived. When military doctors arrived to relieve him, Takashi went searching for her and found, to his horror, that Midori had been reduced by the bomb to a lump of bones and ash in the remains of their kitchen. Heartbroken, he recognised in the bones of her hand the cross of the rosary she used daily in prayer.

In the following days and weeks Takashi continued to care for those who had been injured and burnt and when the Catholic community held an open-air remembrance service in the ruins of Urakami Cathedral he was invited to speak. Remarkably, Takashi suggested that

God had prepared the Catholic community for this tragedy over four centuries of religious faith, and religious persecution.

These are some of the words he offered the congregation on that day, *'Happy are those who weep; for they shall be comforted... We must walk the way of reparation... ridiculed, whipped, punished for our crimes, sweaty and bloody. But we can turn our eyes to Jesus carrying his cross up the hill to Calvary... The Lord has given; the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.'*

Through the prophet Isaiah God said to the people of Israel, and to Takashi Nagai in Nagasaki, *'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine! ...When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you...'*

Surely, God continues to say this to us, and to all humanity, in the midst of wildfires and whatever other challenges we face?

As we close – thankful for the opportunity to gather and worship in safety - please join me in offering a prayer written by Bishop John Harvey Taylor, from the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, written a few days ago:

Gracious and loving God, we pray for your blessing
on those who are fleeing, and those who are safe;
those who battle these fires under the worst possible conditions,
and those whom they serve;
those who offer help, and those who need it;
those measuring incalculable loss,
and those already praying for the will to recover and rebuild;
through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.

¹ **'The Road Trip That Changed the World: The Unlikely Theory That Will Change How You View Culture, the Church, And, Most Importantly, Yourself'**, author - Mark Sayers, Moody Publishers, 2012