

Homily - Stretch out your hand and touch someone. Mark 1:40

This week, we had planned to update you on the progress of our partnership with the people of East Timor. But of course, all of us have been shocked by the disasters in so many parts of Australia, and so we thought it appropriate to reflect upon these tragedies in the light of the Gospel today. Our Timor update will be offered to you in the season of Easter .

The media has deluged us with the reality of hundreds of deaths, massive loss of homes and property, and extensive damage to the environment. Clearly, there has also been a wonderful outpouring of compassion and support for those directly affected. The Catholic Leader this week covers both tragedies. Interestingly on the front page the parish priest of Ingham, Father Michael Taylor, reflects "Although Ingham had been devastated by the worst flood in 30 years, We have survived. We will rebuild - our lives will return to normal . There is a devastatingly different situation in Victoria and elsewhere." Archbishop Bathurst last Monday launched the Catholic Emergency Relief appeal to assist people affected by these disasters . The appeal will be collected throughout the Archdiocese next weekend. Proceeds were to be shared with the victim's of the North Queensland floods, but after discussions between the parishioners in Ingham and the bishops, the parishioners have asked that the money go to those who lost everything in Victoria .

Many in our parish, are still recovering from last years storms . And there will be some parishioners that have experienced disaster in previous places that they have lived. I know from my own experience, that these new events can bring our own previous trauma to the surface again. I have not found it helpful to dwell on disaster, nor subject myself to media overload. An appropriate response though is to reflect upon the situation from our faith perspective. Where is God in this.

Of course, God is in the very midst of the suffering people. God is weeping with them in their loss, and desiring to console them in their grief. God did not cause these tragedies. Tragically the fires have been in some cases, criminal acts. When I studied at the seminary, and Father Neil was the Dean of studies there , I remember writing a 6000 word essay on understanding suffering. As I researched the topic, I discerned that there was an element of suffering that results from the evil actions of human beings; there is an element of suffering that results from the lack of respect or understanding of the environment, when we fail to undertake preventative measures to avoid the expected cycle of floods, fires and drought that we know will come as part of nature . And there is a certain element, which we do not comprehend, where bad things sometimes still do happen to good people.

There on the other hand, some absolutes that we do know. We do know that God loves us without limit. We do know that God wants us to live in the fullness of life. We do know that God wants us to love our neighbor. We know that God will be with us in every situation we face. We do know that God still works miraculously at times . We do know that we have access to eternal life , even though our earthly bodies die . All these certainties should give us hope and consolation.

Last week father, Neil challenged us get to know the person of Jesus, more closely. We heard in the Scriptures, how after Jesus had been healing people in his home territory near Galilee, that he said to his followers; let us go to the neighboring country. There a leper approach him. The leper was suffering. Not only with physical disability, but also social isolation and desperate poverty . On his knees, he pleads to Jesus, "If you want to, you can cure me." Jesus stretches out his

hand, touches him, and says of course I want to - be cured.” The leprosy left him and he was cured.

Jesus had a desire to set new boundaries- extend the limits of love, to open up possibilities of loving the unlovable. Jesus was moved with compassion for those suffering and on the margins. He constantly calls us to re-imagine who is our neighbour, and how we might love our neighbor.

The flood and fire tragedy gives us a new opportunity to love our neighbor. Clearly, we encourage everybody to support this appeal for those who have lost loved ones and physicians possessions. - Now I am conscious that we as a church bring before you many opportunities to contribute to appeals. Some may have compassion fatigue. Some may be anxious that they haven't enough to cover their own expenses. If you are struggling - approach us - of course we would want to help you.

But in regard to the appeals we offer, - If we are prayerful about our considerations in giving, God will guide us. God will inform our conscience, and give us peace about giving. 28 years ago in Lynn and I were challenged to follow the biblical precedent of tithing- setting aside 10%. Since then we have set aside the first 10% of our income for giving to the needs of others. We have been faithful to that and God has been faithful to us. In my 15 years as a deacon, where our family income has been the vicinity of \$40,000 per year in today's terms, we have always managed to give our tithe, pay our bills, and still have some to spare for the unexpected circumstances. We believe that God provides us with a surplus, so that we might be able to be his hands, that reach out and help others. Clearly, many others in our parish have consistently been very good in this. Giving to the poor, requires faith; giving builds our faith, because we come to trust in God's provision. If you want to grow in faith - give of your money !!

Compassion for others, especially for those on the margins, continues to be a hallmark of our Christian character. To grow in that character we encourage you to get to know Jesus more closely - He is the model of compassion. Come and hear about him at the Cathedral on Monday night. Come and discuss him in our Lenten programme. Get out your bible or missal at home and read about him in the scriptures.

For times ahead when we might face disaster - We know from the psalm that we can turn to him in times of trouble, and we will be filled with the joy of salvation. And don't be scared to plead on your knees - Jesus will say to us of course I want to heal you- be cured.

There was a wonderful song in the 70s: “reach out and touch somebody's hand make this world, a better place if you can”. That's Jesus invitation to us today. Thank you to all those who give so generously. God sees, delights in, and acknowledges your gifts of money, time and talent.

Reach out and touch somebody's hand - you will make this world a better place, because you can!