

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 23 JANUARY 2011

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Psalm 27: 1, 4-9; Matthew 4: 12-23

"Called"

After a lovely holiday of two weeks camping in the Flinders Ranges, where we had little or no access to phone or internet we returned to "civilization" and news and images of the Queensland flood crisis. It felt like we'd landed on another planet with the endless newsreels of water everywhere and lives lost and people missing. The size of the area covered in water was unimaginable, the size of the damage impossible to get our head around.

But, as someone said on the radio the other day, when people were complaining about the lack of response from abroad, we also, instinctively, managed to hold some of the intimidating terror we felt at bay by the reassuring thought that this was far away Queensland, part of that weird and wonderful, far away part of the globe called Australia, where they do natural disaster on a scale that is unimaginable to the rest of the world anyway. Wet, drought or fire.

When we drove down through North Western Victoria a couple of days later we ended up in the middle of a more local flood crisis on a slightly smaller scale. Bringing the water closer in both a literal and figurative sense, making us wonder: "if this was small, how big is big?"

We decided to hurry up and return home a bit earlier than planned, because the news kept talking about more water on the way.

A bit rattled and definitely awed at what nature can throw at us in the end, we arrived home two days early, after a detour of about two hundred k's to avoid flooded and closed down roads around the Grampians. Had we lingered on, we would not have got through at all, and not have been on time to pick up the kids from the airport on Tuesday. We might not even have been here with you today, but filling sandbags somewhere between Bordertown and Dimboola.

Traveling through inundated, waterlogged Victoria our minds went back to the winter of 1995 when our home in Holland was threatened by flood and we were given four hours to evacuate on what had been an ordinary Monday night. The fear for the water we saw creep up against the side of the five meters high dike we could see from our home and that was supposed to protect our polder area. The desperate haste with which we lifted as much of our belongings as we could to the loft. The trip in the car to my parents' place along roads choked with too much traffic moving in one direction. Well aware that if the dikes would break we would all be under 3 meters of water in seconds.

We spent a week watching and waiting but were fortunate enough to return home to nothing more serious than a smelly defrosted freezer. Knowing that it could have been much, much worse, very easily.

And you know what?

In hindsight, when we look back on our life as it developed from there, we feel that we would probably not have made the decisions or made the moves that finally got us to Balwyn North, Melbourne, Australia, or at least not as easily, if we had not had that experience of nearly losing

everything.

That one, anxious week, back in 1995, had a profound impact on the rest of our lives. It forced us to let go and reconsider our priorities and made us look at the world in a completely different way.

Once you discover you can lose everything in under four hours, life loses a lot if not all of its solidity. We discovered that possessions, photographs, personal belongings are valuable but relative. And that getting yourself and your family out alive is the one thing that counts more than anything else. That much of the rest, in the end, is bonus - nice, but not really necessary when it comes down to it.

It was a massive exercise in letting go, which liberated us to a much easier and less cluttered existence (not that our garage is now empty of boxes). I guess we lived a little bit more dangerously after that, less attached, less anxious, more generous, more spacious and more adventurous. And I am very grateful for that.

Don't get me wrong: I would not wish it on anybody to go through the trauma, even when nothing much happens in the end. Because even if there is something to be gained from going through something like that, the negatives will mar and scar your existence for the rest of your life as well.

But, in the end, living through a flood crisis created space for us to live more conscious of the vulnerability of what we had, up till then, considered one of the cornerstones of a "solid" life.

Any solidity in life is only relative, and is always under threat, if not from flood or fire then from other challenges and trauma life can throw at us, from relationships going wrong, jobs being lost, and of course accidents, sickness, and death. All that is certain is that nothing is certain.

I am sure you will all have had, in one way or another, experiences like this in your own life. They are part of life, of growing up. We all discover, at some point in our life, there is quite a bit we don't have control over in life, that unexpected developments will change life in a heart beat, that trauma, crisis, sickness and death can be around the corner for any of us, no matter what age we are or how cautious and conscious of healthy living. We all learn, at some point in time, willing or not, that there are times and situations where there is no choice but to let go and live with whatever has been thrown at us to deal with.

It can be flood or fire, it can be as simple as gradually learning to accept that you'll have to downsize because the house is really getting beyond what you can manage. It can even be as simple as discovering and accepting that life isn't as it used to be.

It can be coming to terms with the fact that the Church is not what it was thirty years ago, or it can be worse: closing the doors of what has been your spiritual home for many years and moving to a place where things aren't done the way you think is right.

And now we are talking Church anyway: It can be an amalgamation that unsettles and changes what seemed solid and steady, just when you thought everything was ship shape with an excellent course plotted into the future.

It can be a rabbi from Nazareth, walking into your life and inviting you to drop everything that gave you comfort and security in life and follow.

When we talk about the amalgamation and vote on the Memorandum later on, I believe that is what we need to focus on. On that rabbi ambling down the road and stopping for a brief moment where

we are busy with our lives, our families, our community, our Church, our jobs, our way of doing things, our finances, our properties, our friends and foes, our trust and our suspicions, our prejudices and our anxieties, and decide who we are with.

Are we with him who asks his disciples to leave their jobs, their families, their communities, everything that is dear and familiar to them, their financial security, the comfort of what they know and love and drop it all to follow him? Or are we the captives of the life and the community we have built, even where we did it in his name?

And not only that. What is very disturbing about the story we have read from Matthew today is not only that Jesus asks his disciples to let go of everything that made up their life until that moment and let go, what is even more unsettling is the fact that they *immediately* dropped everything and followed. (Of course this was before the invention of regulation handbooks!)

Immediately.

I don't know about you, but I know I couldn't. Ever. I've discovered that I need at least four hours to get some stuff together to take with me. And that I really want my family there as well. And perhaps we might as well confess to each other now that as congregations we find that pretty hard to live up to. We both have traditions we are proud of, "stuff" we're attached to which is sacred to us, structures we are convinced work better than others.

Instead of a flood that will wash it all away, there will be a journey of careful negotiation and slow integration, of getting to know each others' ways, of letting go in compromise some of what is important to us and gaining, in compromise, some unexpected bonuses. If we let this amalgamation go ahead of course. It will be an adventure we have no way of knowing how it might end. Christ will be with us though, our light and our stronghold.

Even if everything goes pear-shaped because it becomes all too difficult with the past and the future and our anxieties and prejudices and power struggles and politics getting in the way. Even then, Christ will still be with us, knowing and understanding just how hard it is to let go and follow him on his journey into an unknown, uncertain and insecure future. Because he lived inside our skin and experienced how difficult it is to live the liberated life of a child of God.

Amen.