

DON'T BE STUMPED THIS CHRISTMAS (8th December 2019, Lindfield)

ISAIAH 11: 1-10

A shoot growing out of the stump of Jesse, the gifts of the Spirit, the peaceable kingdom where predators and their prey live side by side, and babies play unharmed near poisonous snakes. Woody Allen once gave his own interpretation of this vision: "The wolf shall lie down with the lamb, but the lamb won't get much sleep."

A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse. The stump is dead. God had said it would be so. Just before this chapter He declares punishment on the people: *the tallest trees will be cut down and the lofty will be brought low.* The trees, the people, both will be clean cut off. And yet another word comes from the same prophet: *A shoot will come from the stump of Jesse...* What does this say to us this Advent?

Australians understand this very well. We will all see it soon. After the fires are out and the rain has come we will see this a million times. From blackened, dead trees, shrubs and even rocks, we will see signs of new life Small green shoots will emerge. From the dead, new life will come.

When I was living in Bathurst there were severe fires in the Blue Mountains. Driving back and forth I saw the bush start to come to life. From charred, broken trees that were once tall, ancient eucalypts, green shoots began to emerge. Then more and more. They grew and as they were watered the bush was finally renewed. After a year or so it was hard to tell where the fire had been. It was miraculous. I wish I had taken photos of the various stages. I will never forget on the side of a rocky ledge I noticed a small plant emerge. From the rock with apparently no or very little soil there was enough to provide life and the plant grabbed hold of that opportunity for life and took it and flourished. Within the creation life isn't necessarily stayed by what looks like certain death. What a great and obvious illustration for Christians!

I am sure we all know people who have suffered terrible loss or other tragedy. You see it in their body, their demeanour. Perhaps they start to walk a bit more stooped; they aren't so jovial; they keep to themselves more than they did; they don't look at you in the eye; they don't stop for a nice chat. Then, one day, something appears different. They seem to walk more uprightly, they stop and chat to you in the street and even share a joke. Something happened. Something big. Maybe it wasn't an overnight thing. Maybe it was painfully slow. Maybe it was as hard as a tender, young plant straining to push through the charred earth or from the dead tree.

There must have been some reason but in seeing it for the first time it seem to be a miracle!

We know people or know of people who have very firm ideas about who can do what in society. I have heard people say that you can't educate our First Peoples because they'll just go on walkabout when things get too hard. You are wasting money giving them a house to live in because they'll just burn the floorboards and cook on a fire inside! Perhaps more latterly the story goes that we shouldn't allow refugees into the country because they'll just stick in their own groups and won't assimilate. How do we know they aren't terrorists? Yet we see how successful so many have become. Remember that magnificent cellist at Harry and Megan's wedding? Enough said.

Whether it is nature, an individual or a community a shoot will grow from the stump of Jesse. When we sit on the stump of utter despair, who can imagine anything growing - where hope is cut off, where loss and despair have deadened our hearts?

Today, God's Advent word comes to sit with us. This word will not ask us to get up and dance. The prophet's vision is surprising but small. The nation would never rise again. The shoot would not become a mighty cedar. The shoot that was growing would be different from what the people expected.

For he grew up before them like a young plant,

and like a root out of dry ground:

he had no form or majesty that we should look at him.

nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. (Isaiah 53:2)

This shoot from Jesse's stump – fragile yet tenacious and stubborn. It would grow like a plant out of dry ground. It would push back the stone from the rock-hard tomb.

It will grow in the heart of a man cut off by sorrow or tragedy until one morning he can look up and smile again. It will grow in the hearts of people who are told they will never amount to anything. The plant will grow. It will break through the places where we were certain it couldn't. These people end us as Members of Parliament, University Professors or world class cellists.

That's why I have a special liking for this Communion. In Advent we are reminded of that small sign of new life out of the seemingly impossible. Then when we see bread broken and we hold it, smell it and taste it; when we see wine lifted up and we smell it, hold it and taste it – we are reminded that the stump of Jesse did grow and fulfil God's purpose which was not only for him but for the entire world – past, present and future.

What if we believe this fragile sign is God's beginning? Perhaps then we will tend the seedling in our hearts, the place where faith longs to break through the hardness of our disbelief. Do not wait for the tree to be full grown. God comes to us in this Advent time and invites us to move beyond counting the rings of the past. We may still want to sit on the stump for a while, and God will sit with us. But God will also keep nudging us, "Look!, Look – there on the stump. Do you see that green shoot growing?" AMEN.
