

BUSHFIRES COVID 19 AND THE RESURRECTION FAITH

by John Taylor

A few weeks ago, after the Australian bushfire crisis had passed and before COVID19 was designated as a pandemic, my wife, Janine Wood, and I went on one of our favourite bushwalks in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. For much of the walk there was little or no evidence of fire activity but near the end of the walk significant fire damage could be seen. Nearly all the trees and bushes in that section were black and charred and the dirt around them looked like grey ash. Remarkably though, new shoots were appearing in most plants, even in blacked stumps of trees. It made me think of the resilience of nature and of the all-pervasive will to live; the spirit of life.

Then, a few weeks later, when thousands were infected and dying from COVID19 all over the world, we went on the same walk again. The same trees and shrubs were still charred and blackened but the extent of the new growth in those few weeks was remarkable. One thing that we noticed this time that we had not noticed the previous time was that most of the eucalypt trees were shedding their bark to concentrate their energies on their new growth which was often from the lower parts of the tree.

Somehow thinking of the response of nature to the Australian bushfires gave me hope for humanity in its response to the COVID19 pandemic. Sure, much will depend on scientific work, on medical interventions, on the adequacy of health systems in different countries but most important of all will be communities' will to live, to give up some freedoms for their common

survival. In the absence of a shared will to live, to think communally, even the best health systems in the world will be overrun with an unprecedented surge in demand for essential equipment and intensive care spaces. The regrowth at the lower parts of the tree will be essential to survival.

The resurrection faith can attune us to the spirit of life.

The importance of the resurrection faith to the earliest disciples can be seen in the account that Paul provides in 1st Corinthians 15 of the 'facts which had been imparted to me' when he first became a Christian:

'that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised to life on the third day; according to the scriptures; and that he appeared to Cephas and afterwards to the Twelve. Then he appeared to over five hundred of our brothers at once, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, and afterwards to all the apostles.

In the end he appeared even to me; though this birth of mine was monstrous, for I had persecuted the church and therefore am inferior to all other apostles – indeed not fit to be called an apostle. However, by God's grace I am what I am, nor has his grace been given to me in vain; on the contrary, in my labours I have outdone them all – not I, indeed, but the grace of God working in me. But what matter I or they? This is what we all proclaim, and this is what you believed.'

In the whole of the New Testament, this is the only account of an event in Jesus' career which, virtually



Photo: Janine Woods

no-one disputes, is a first person eye witness account. The resurrection, therefore, is the only event in Jesus' career which is backed up by what modern historians would regard as primary evidence. Ironically, much of the remaining evidence for resurrection is often regarded as coming from the earliest tradition because it is, by the standards of the time, so bad that no one would have made it up. In all accounts the earliest witnesses are women. This in a culture when the testimony of women was not accepted in court. Moreover, in the beginning no-one believes Mary of Magdala (see Luke 24.10f). In contrast to the close conformity of the passion accounts, the resurrection accounts are fragmentary, mysterious, almost otherworldly appearances without temporal, geographic or locational continuity. Remarkably, Paul's account of Jesus' appearance to over 500 at once appears no-where else in the whole of the New Testament, unless Pentecost is regarded as an experience of the resurrected Lord. If these were different aspects of the same event then the presence of the Spirit of God in the life of the church can be seen as the presence of the risen Christ.

The resurrection is first then an affirmation of God's renewing, creative and transformative spirit in response to adversity. It is God's 'yes' to life. While obviously not completely analogous, the feelings of the first disciples following Jesus' crucifixion must have paralleled those who have lost all in bushfires or loved ones due to COVID19. Out of the despair that the disciples must have felt at Jesus' crucifixion

comes what was clearly the transformative effect of the resurrection appearances. Paul's own account is testimony to this; transformed from a persecutor or the church to an apostle of the Lord.

Second, notice how Paul recounts the resurrection events immediately after reciting the facts of the crucifixion. In Paul's thought at least the two appear to be interlinked. 'For if when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved through his life'. (Romans 5:10). Just as in the fire ravaged Australian bush rebirth was from the ground up so too was the resurrection faith born out of the forsaken, suffering, crucified Jesus.

Despite the miracle stories of the Gospels, the dominant picture of Christ that emerges from the New Testament as a whole, and is congruent with our faith tradition, is of someone who was attuned to the Spirit of God, who suffered and died, and was experienced as a resurrected living presence. This is not an image of God as the all-powerful or as the lawmaker but rather as the co-sufferer, the purposive lover and the passionate creator who continues to create and renews all life and all existence at every level. So, in the fires and in COVID19 God is there and suffering with all suffering creation but is also renewing, transforming and if we are spiritually sensitive people, affecting our behaviour and making us rethink our relationship to nature, humanity and eternity. We will regrow when we connect with the spirit of life.