

Homily for 1st Anniversary Memorial Mass for the Victims and Survivors of Black Saturday 2009 (7 Feb 2010)

By Fr Steele Hartmann OCSO

We are now twelve months on since Black Saturday. Twelve months ago our place was left burnt. I thought we would be looking out across black for months and months. In the intervening time since then we have rebuilt our fences, resown our pastures and replaced our livestock. The weather has been kind in these last twelve months, resembling nothing like what we experienced twelve months ago. Today as we look out across our property it's all green. For us, mercifully, little is left of the devastation that visited us on Black Saturday. But, if you look, you can still see dead trees about our dam. In time these, too, will be replaced or removed, and the evidence of Black Saturday will be harder to find.

Not all reminders of what happened are an unpleasant memory. Every time I drive along the road to Healesville, I am always taken by that amazing view now opened up because we had to remove our pine plantation as a result of the fires. This, too, is a reminder of Black Saturday. Then, too, there are the hundreds and hundreds of new trees we have planted along the road, which, though they point to the future and new life, are there also as a result of and so a reminder of Black Saturday. These trees, as they grow slowly but surely, will eventually swallow up the view now opened up — ever so slowly that we will probably not even notice — till that view, too, will be taken from our sight. By then Black will have become a memory. By then there will be a whole generation who will have grown up and who will not have experienced any of what we remember and for whom it will be only some event back in history.

In lots of ways our place here is a parable about life, life that is given us — for it is not ours; we do not possess it. We have it only for a time and then we don't have it. How well we know this from Black Saturday, when so many had their life cut short. We cannot even say we will have it for a set length of time, like a long-term lease. We just have it for a time and then we don't have it. It is as the Psalm has observed: "When you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created and you renew the face of the earth" (Ps 104:29-30).

I always find it helpful here to remember that the word for "breath" and "spirit" are the same in Hebrew. This life that we have is not ours, but something of God! I heard just recently that the name the Hebrews gave to God, which we pronounce Yahweh, was not really meant to be a word, but the sound of a breath: "Yah" [the audible indrawn breath]; "Weh" [the audible exhaled breath]. Our every breath, then, is meant to be a reminder that our very existence is sustained only by God from breath to breath, and for which we can only marvel and give thanks, much in line with the Psalm: "What are we that you keep us in mind, mere mortals that you think of us, we who are only a breath, whose life fades like a shadow?" (Ps 144:3-4). But therein lies our answer, for with our every breath [Yah/Weh] we call on the name of our God, a God who says to all who long for life, "Even before you ask me, I will say to you: Here I am" (*Rule of St Benedict* Prologue:15,18). Our God is indeed here with us every moment of our life, in our every breath, breathing life into us (cf. Jn 20:22).

The events of Black Saturday almost beg us to wrestle with those questions that beguile us when disaster befalls us: Why has God done this to me? Why has he let this happen to me? I don't know that there is an answer to these kinds of questions. And anyway, even if there were, they would change nothing. Things just are as they are, and what we

have is life. This time last year when I spoke to you just after the bush fires, I told you a story I once read of a priest interned in a Nazi concentration camp in Germany during World War II. After the war he found himself in a displaced persons camp, where a young soldier was taking down his details. The soldier asked him when he was liberated. He replied that he was liberated on something like the 6th May, 1942. The soldier stopped and said kindly, "No, no, Father. That can't be right. We didn't get here until 1945." The priest replied, "You asked me when I was liberated, and that was on the 6th May 1942. For until that day I was living in sheer hell: brutality, barbed wire, barking guards, summary executions, starvation, forced labour, kept from all that was near and dear to me, ... it was all just so unspeakably awful. Then one day, on the 6th May, I looked over and, there against the wall of our hut, a small plant had managed to grow up in the mud and neglect and had blossomed. I realised then that even here life was possible, and not only possible but that it was possible even here to grow and bloom, and that this was my call here." He said, "Then the barbed wire ceased to be a fence keeping me in; it simply marked the perimeter of my world, within which I was called to be a priest to those people here, and God knows they needed someone. And so I was able to get on with being a priest and serving my God, which is all I ever wanted to do and this I did."

Last year when we were all still feeling quite raw after the fires, I suggested that perhaps in the tremendous outpouring of overwhelmingly generous support we might see the small plant growing out of the mess and flowering, and hear in it God's call to live. And it really was generous, as we here know only too well — and for which I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and all our benefactors for what can only be described as your amazingly generous help and support in whatever form it took. Today, twelve months on, I would encourage you to look for the signs of new life that are slowly but surely emerging out of the mess that was Black Saturday as we repair and rebuild, and hear in it the call to live. We will not as yet find a whole

garden, for our foundation, the very earth itself, was burnt and needs time to recover. But if we look, we will see that little small shoot that is already springing up and even now beginning to bud and blossom with promise. It is not big enough to cover all the scars of Black Saturday, but its flower is really pretty, if only we stop to look.

What perhaps we felt could never be again is beginning to take shape once more. Like our land here, what was all black is showing green again. The new life is precious and fragile, as those of us who were seriously touched by the fires do know; we need to tend it carefully, that it may grow strong. But we also need to appreciate it, admire its beauty, marvel at it, that we may grow strong. Given time, the garden will return, without our needing to know why or how, or whatever questions may have been bedeviling us. It just is as our Gospel this morning tells us: "Night and day, while he sleeps, when he is awake, the seed is sprouting and growing; how he does not know. Of its own accord the land produces first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the crop is ready he loses no time: he starts to reap because the harvest has come" (Mk 4:27-29). "This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen", as Jesus would put it (Lk 4:21).