



# WHERE IS GOD IN THIS?

## A theological reflection on trauma in response to the Victorian bushfires

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Climate scientists have been warning about global warming for many decades. Increasingly frequent and severe weather events, rising sea levels, floods, fires, droughts for example are now beginning to impact our lives and appear more urgently in our public discourse.

As the impact of the fires becomes more evident, devastating so many communities and creatures across this land, powerful emotions related to loss and trauma arise, including: horror, fear, shock, despair, sadness, depression and anger.

People might well ask: Why should me/our community suffer in this way? Who will help? How can we support each other at such a time? Will it happen again? What did I/we do to deserve this? Where is God? Is God to blame?

There is no easy way of addressing such questions about trauma, and there are no easy answers. Trauma, in this case inflicted by fire, is what insurers' call an 'act of God'. So where is God in this?

Echoes of the questions above are found in Jesus' cry of anguish from the cross: "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"



## How might Scripture inform and support us?

- ▶ Job struggled with the meaning of his immense suffering. He lost everything, great herds of livestock, his sons and his daughters, and finally, covered with ulcers, his health. Three friends arrive to comfort him but insist on the ‘truth’ that suffering is punishment for evil. For 34 chapters the friends repeat, rehash and backtrack over tired arguments, their theology ‘an exhausted mine’ (McKibben, 1994).<sup>1</sup>

Job himself is struggling with a ‘new fact’, one that simply does not fit his (and their) assumptions. He knows he is not an evil man; he is thus locked in a battle with the orthodoxy of his time.

Then, at long last, God speaks. God does not address Job’s immediate problems, does not refer to his acute distress nor to his anguished questions. In answer God speaks of a wild and glorious world – a world that is ‘rapacious, tough, deadly, amoral’ – intoxicatingly alive, every being in place (McKibben, 1994).<sup>2</sup>

God is giving Job new eyes, showing him that he is part, and only part, of a vast world. Humans are not the centre. We are part of a wider ‘other than human’ creation that exists without us and before us. In the presence of this glory, and this immensity, Job is silent.

- ▶ We turn too to the Psalms, where Jesus’ cry is pre-figured in Psalm 22:1-2:

*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest”.*

Words of comfort and deliverance follow in verse 24:

*“For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him”.*

Psalm 23 is a beautiful reminder of God’s journey with us through the valley of the shadow of death, and the restoration of our souls when we are in God’s company.

- ▶ Poignantly, next month we begin the journey of Lent on Ash Wednesday (26 February). As ashes are prepared by burning palm leaves from the previous year’s Palm Sunday celebrations, the Good Friday story of death and desolation reaches its culmination in the resurrection and hope of Jesus revealed on Easter Sunday. From ashes we are all risen in Christ.

- ▶ It doesn’t end there. 50 days later (Sunday 31 May) we mark Pentecost when the Holy Spirit in the form of wind and fire came to those assembled in Jerusalem. Jesus appeared to the disciples (John 20:19 - 23) and breathed the Holy Spirit upon them and said: *“Peace be with you”*. This meeting of hope and peace in the risen broken body, offers us strength and encouragement to our sagging hearts and communities.

As we share the elements of bread and wine in the Eucharist we are reminded of God’s gift to us in Christ and give thanks for God’s presence with us in times of suffering.

There are no easy answers. Too often we hear trite attempts that only further alienate when what is needed above all is a sense that God journeys with us in the hearts and minds and actions of those around us. In the times of emptiness, suffering and wondering, we are also called to humility in the face of God’s good creation:

*“But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, [and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you.*

*In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being” (Job 12: 7-8, 10).*

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1 quoted in McKibben, B., (1994). p 2.

2 McKibben, B., (1994). p 56.