



Rev Helen Jacobi

Rain

Year A, Ordinary 7

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 9-18

Matthew 5: 38-48

19 February 2023

“God makes the sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Mt 5:45) Too much rain, way too much rain.

I think we are all still in a state of shock after the floods at the end of January, and now the devastation of cyclone Gabrielle. The photos coming out of the Hawke’s Bay and Tairāwhiti and areas of Auckland and north defy belief. We mourn those who have died and mourn with those who have lost everything.

One of the great symbols of survival and rebirth after the 1931 Hawke’s Bay earthquake was the Navy ship Veronica which was anchored offshore when the earthquake struck. When the HMNZS Canterbury arrives in Napier today to help it will feel surreal for the people of Napier. History repeating itself with generations marked by the trauma of the earthquake and now the floods.

One of the most heart-breaking images for me was to see Hukarere School with mud and water up to the rooves in the Esk Valley. Hukarere is an Anglican Maori girls school, the sister school of the more famous Te Aute School. Many of the girls who board there come from families with limited means and to lose their school in an entirety seems so unjust. The girls were evacuated to St Joseph’s RC school and many have returned home. What will become of their school year I wonder?

We know already I think that these floods have affected poorer communities in both Auckland and the rural areas more. In some ways everyone has been affected, but the consequences of the rain seems be falling more on the poorer communities.

Whenever disaster strikes we ask why? Why God? why now? why here? We know in our heads that God is not a puppet master in the sky; and Jesus tells us the rain falls equally on everyone – but in our hearts we still question. Why the firefighters in Muriwai? why the child in the Esk Valley? Why Hukarere?

And we know in our heads the answer is nature's randomness; along with climate change; land use like forestry; and inadequate infrastructure. But in our hearts we still ask why God, why? I wish I had an answer, but of course I don't.

Our only answer is what we have seen in the incredible heroism of helicopter pilots plucking people off rooves. Others opening their homes to strangers. Army and road workers and electricity workers toiling through the night.

And as the need becomes clearer and the church shares information with us we will be able to support the Dioceses of Waiapu and Tairāwhiti in their work of rebuilding. The Anglican Missions Board has launched an appeal and we have printed that information for you. We can offer donations as well as our prayer.

It is not often that we have a reading from the OT book of Leviticus on a Sunday! The piece we heard this morning is part of a long list of rules for living.

You shall not steal, you shall not defraud or slander ...

But two interesting ones: “when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field ... you shall not strip the vineyard bare – you shall leave them for the poor and the alien.”

So when bringing in the harvest, the idea is that the farmer leaves a strip for those without land to harvest; and the same with grapes – you don't take them all but leave some for your neighbour who may have none.

So the way you farm your land or run your business is not just about you the owner, but is about the whole community, making sure all are cared for.

We have seen that care these last weeks; everyone sharing resources and food, helping each other out. But taking a wider view some of the causes of these floods and damage is because people have not taken care, have not thought of the bigger picture.

Forest companies in Tairāwhiti have not addressed the damage the “slash”, the left behind branches and trees can do. Planners and developers and councils have not built drains that are big enough. And every one of us has not done enough to cut our carbon emissions. We have not obeyed the commandment to love your neighbour as yourself.

The writers of Leviticus and other parts of the Hebrew scripture would have no hesitation in seeing a cyclone as the “judgement” of God. God acting in the world to change the course of events or to correct the ways of the people or to send a message.

While we do not see God as one who acts and “punishes” in that way we can, I think, see the floods and cyclones themselves as a kind of judgement. A message, a wake up call. Time to change, time to act. The rain falls on the just and the unjust and the wake up call is for everyone.

As we go forward we will hear of more opportunities to help those who need assistance rebuilding in the short term but in the longer term we all need to grapple again with what we can do to mitigate climate change.

I spoke a couple of weeks ago about our compost bins and some people have stepped up to volunteer – thank you – there is room for more!

Later on in the year after we have had our confirmation service in April there is going to be an opportunity for a tree planting day. There is a new initiative across the worldwide Anglican Communion called the Anglican Forest.

The idea is that when someone is baptised or confirmed they plant a tree. Just one tree. But multiply that by the number of Anglicans in our world – 85 million – and if just some of those people are getting baptised or confirmed and if they all plant trees – then we have a forest!

On April 30 Bishop Ross will be with us to confirm a group of young people; during Lent you will be hearing more about this confirmation process and how we are going to support our candidates.

And then in June (probably, date tbc) we will accompany our candidates to plant their trees at a community planting day organised by A Rocha, the eco church group. And we will be part of the Anglican forest.

Composting and planting trees – two ways we can act. Knowing that doesn't take away the shock and the grief for so many. We have to stand with those who are suffering as well.

We can ask together – why God, why? and then pick up and move on and help each other to act justly in the way we live our lives.

Leaving the some of the harvest so everyone can share in it; loving our neighbour; and learning to build our cities better so we can all enjoy a future together.

Places where the rain will fall on the righteous and the unrighteous and no one will drown.