

Sunday January 3rd 2021 – Colin Bradford

On becoming Children of God

We have left 2020 behind and most of us are hoping for a better year in 2021. The pandemic is still with us; a vaccine is at least two months away; and how effective it is we cannot be certain. The deaths of 1.7 million people, and the loss of income for millions more remind us that life is contingent; we are mortal; bad stuff happens. And while we like to think that humanity has subdued nature and brought it under control, when bad things happen, we cry out, "Why did God allow this to happen?"

The reality is that we are mortal and not in control. And the bushfires of last summer, which ended the hottest driest and longest drought on record, remind us that humanity is pushing the boundaries of climate change. Scientists warn us those boundaries are tipping points which could send our climate into irreversible warming well above two degrees with catastrophic consequences.

And despite pleas from the United Nations for wars to cease while we deal with the pandemic, fighting continued, new wars broke out, refugees still died trying to reach safety and black lives were still treated as less worthy than others. Even in Australia, where the governments acted swiftly following expert medical and scientific advice, a line had to be drawn somewhere and so vulnerable people were left out of the financial support: asylum seekers, overseas students and many casual workers became dependent upon over-stretched charities.

There is darkness: the darkness of creation itself epitomised by the White Island eruption in New Zealand this year and even more catastrophically in the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami killing almost 230 000 people; the darkness of human suffering through war and acts of violence; the darkness of poverty and systemic racism. But to cry out, "Why did God let this happen", is the wrong question, implying that God is to blame, or that there should be no darkness.

John's Gospel has a different take: he writes that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.

In the first few verses of his Gospel, John draws connections with the first few verses of the first book of the Bible, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ... darkness covered the face of the deep, while the Spirit of God swept over the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'... And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness."

Most significantly, John draws connections between the experiences of his community encountering the risen Christ and the creating God. While Luke and Matthew's Gospels claim that Jesus was divine at his birth, or conception, John claims that the Christ is co-eternal with God in some mysterious way. The evidence that John gives to support this contention is that "we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son". If, as most biblical scholars contend, that John wrote towards the end of the first century, the 'we' would include members of his congregation who had never known Jesus of Nazareth, crucified some 60 years earlier. John's congregation had encountered the risen Christ.

His contention is beyond the realms of science. He is writing of the mystery of faith: a mystery which John invites us to enter. Well, he certainly did not have us in mind when he wrote, he was writing for his faith community. But I like to think that nevertheless we can read in a spiritual way as an invitation to us. This invitation is to become children of God.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, sees this invitation as coming from God before time itself, "just as he chose us before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love, he destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ".

I do not pretend to understand what this means. But what I take from it is this: faith is relational. The basis of faith is not accepting certain doctrinal statements so much as relationship with God, experienced both personally and in a community. As Schliermacher put it, "doctrine is a reflection of the miracle of direct relationship with the divine".

So, perhaps just as Christ was imagined by John to be the creating power of God, maybe we are also, as Children of God, to be the creating power of God – not individually, but as a community of faithful followers of Christ. That is, we can have creative influence in our world, both the natural world and the world of human and national relationships.

John writes that grace and truth has come through Jesus Christ. I think our role is to nurture what we have been given. Worshipping together, spending time in prayer, seeking to understand our faith, being aware of what is going on around us, and being deeply aware of what is going on inside us, I believe, is how we nurture this grace and truth that we have been given.

When the darkness comes, there is a light within us and among us and around us. And the darkness will not overcome the light. So let's not ask, "Why did God let this happen", but instead look for the light.