

Shared Grief

Saturday February 7th 2009 started off as a scorcher in the Kinglake area of Victoria. It would get worse. As the temperature rose rapidly on its way to 47 degrees Celsius, and with hot dry winds blowing and increasing in strength, Andrew's daughter wanted to go to the swimming pool. What else can you do on a day like that? So, on that Saturday morning Andrew set out to drive his daughter to the pool. As he drove he saw, off to the north-west, smoke from the fire which had been reported burning from the Kilmore area, but it was quite some way off and no immediate threat. Nonetheless, Andrew called friends on his mobile phone and said that it was something which they should keep an eye on. When you live in the heavily wooded hills and mountains of the Victorian countryside bushfires are not something that you take lightly.



What Andrew didn't know was that the fire was moving at incredibly high speed and, even worse, that another fire, as yet unseen, was approaching from the opposite direction. The two fires would join up and descend on the small township of Kinglake in one terrifying and unstoppable fire storm. Andrew had a few other errands to run after he dropped his daughter at the pool and by the time he headed back into Kinglake the fire was such a threat that police had closed all access roads and were refusing Andrew, and other Kinglake residents, permission to enter the township and to return to their homes. None of them knew whether they still had a home or whether the fire had taken everything they owned. None of them knew whether their friends, neighbours, and family who were trapped in the township would survive. Many would not. It would be Tuesday afternoon of the next week before police opened the roads and Andrew and the other Kinglake residents were able to return to their township to see what was left of their homes and properties. Most would find nothing standing. Of 200 homes in the Kinglake area only nine remained standing and eight of those were significantly damaged.

I think it was Buzz Aldrin, second man to walk on the moon, who coined the phrase "magnificent desolation" to describe the lunar landscape, but there was nothing "magnificent" about the desolation of Kinglake. "Total" or "utter"

might be better words; where families had once made their homes there remained only ghostly chimneys and piles of burned rubble, the lush green of “the Garden State” had been replaced with black ash, powerlines were down, cars were burned out, and those trees still standing were black skeletal sentinels standing amidst the lingering smoke.



Andrew’s home, amazingly, was one of the nine homes still standing, though the veranda posts were burned out and the steps at the front of the house were gone. His shed, too, was gone, but the

house stood. Relief! Unbelievable relief, but then quickly replaced by another emotion. Guilt! All around him was desolation. So many people had died in Kinglake that Saturday and virtually every home and every building had been destroyed. All around him, Andrew saw that friends and neighbours had lost everything, in many cases the lives of family or loved ones. The feeling of guilt in those circumstances is one which many survivors speak of; “Why was I spared? How can I face my friends and neighbours who have lost everything when I have not shared fully in that loss?” It takes time to come to grips with the seemingly random nature of such disasters.

During the next week, as Andrew lay in bed at night he could hear strange creaking in the house and subsequent investigation revealed that damage to the house was more severe than had initially been thought. The creaking came from the roof structure which had been damaged by the fire and was in danger of collapsing. Andrew got the roof propped up and temporarily secured, but major repairs would be needed.

A new water tank was ordered and when it arrived and was put in place Andrew went outside with his camera to take a photograph. And then it happened! As he stood there with the camera raised to take the photograph, surrounded by ash and burnt trees, suddenly a wild kookaburra flew in and perched on his arm. There was probably nowhere else for the kookaburra to land. It seemed bewildered as it sat on his arm, just looking at him, as if to say “Will you help me? Will you get me something to drink?” After several moments Andrew went inside and got some water and some meat, returned and gave it to the kookaburra. It is amazing that a wild bird would come and perch on a man’s arm, and I’d like to tell you that the kookaburra stayed around and the two befriended each other, but that is not the case. The kookaburra, no doubt

grateful for the help it had been given, left and has not been seen since. But that moment when it sat on his arm and the two looked each other in the eye may have been a turning point for Andrew as he struggled to deal with the trauma of the fires. With desolation all around perhaps the man and the bird were both in a bewildered state of despair, perhaps they needed each other right at that moment. The kookaburra helped to make Andrew feel useful and needed, it helped lift Andrew's spirits and perhaps that is why God sent it. Andrew will never forget the trauma of the fires, but he will also never forget the moment that he and a wild bird shared their grief.

Andrew's parents worship at LBC and it was from them that I learned of this amazing story. When Andrew's mother spoke to him on the telephone a few days later she asked him "How's the weather over there?" and Andrew replied "It's wonderful! It's cold, and it's raining!" God had sent the rain for which people all over the country had been praying. God is good.

(Ian)