

So this is what it feels like to lose your country



***In other countries they have wars...
I've always thought of my country as not the place that has flood, famine, war – you know, all the apocalyptic stuff. But I was wrong, wasn't I?
I guess my overwhelming feeling is of loss. It's grief.
Australia is a precious and beautiful place. It smells and sounds and feels like no other place on God's earth. And it has been scorched to the point of irreparable damage.
It's just simply devastating to contemplate the scale of this disaster, and the loss of human life, property, flora and fauna. The consequences of this event will be generational – at least. Who can put this into words?***

Those are the thoughts of Sydney Anglican rector Rev Dr Michael Jensen and despite feeling he can't put it into words, I think he speaks for many Australians.
The loss, the grief, the anxiety. We all feel it.

The 2019-20 bushfire season, becoming known as Black Summer, is now the longest continuously burning fire complex in Australia's history. It has burned more than 5 million hectares (12,000,000 acres), with flames as high as 70 metres (230 ft).

Compare that to the 2018 California wildfires (766,439 hectares or 1,893,910 acres) and the 2019 Amazon rainforest fires (900,000 hectares or 2,200,000 acres) and you can see the level of devastation.

So far, 25 lives have been lost, with a further six missing at the time of writing.

Over 2,500 buildings, including over 1,300 houses, have been destroyed.

Close to half a billion animals have been affected. Half the koalas in NSW and on Kangaroo Island have been lost. Cattle stocks in the Victorian high country have been devastated. The losses of other fauna in national parks and state forests is inestimable.



Personally, I don't live near the affected areas, but, like everyone, I know people who've lost property or been evacuated from their homes. I also know a lot of people who, though not directly affected, are deeply distressed by this disaster.

Friends have told me they can't sleep, they feel continual low-level sadness. Some speak about feeling helpless or angry.

There's grief about the loss of life, and anxiety about the loss of native animals and livestock. There's deep concern about the future of our nation. It feels like we've all experienced a kind of collective trauma because of the devastation that has occurred to our country.

In times of hardship Aussies often say things like, "no worries" or "she'll be right." But no one is saying that this time.

The other day a friend said to me, "I feel as though our country is being lost to us."

Let that sink in.

While this current natural disaster is unprecedented in terms of the destruction of flora, fauna and property, the widespread collective feeling of grief and loss is not. It was first experienced by our Indigenous people 250 years ago, and continues to this day.

I've heard several people say that we need to listen to Aboriginal peoples to hear what they have to teach us about the use of fire in land management, in how to properly care for the land and waters of this vast, dry continent. I agree.

But, just as importantly, we need to listen to Aboriginal peoples to help us understand how to deal with loss and grief, with the horrors of feeling we're losing our country.

They were dispossessed of their country 250 years ago with the advent of the colonization of this continent.

In saying this, I don't mean to minimize the depth of connection to country felt by Indigenous peoples. Many non-Indigenous Australians can't appreciate how important land is to them.

Many of us are recent arrivals in this country, and we're insulated from the land by layers of concrete and asphalt and manicured gardens. And yet, if we can mourn for the loss of our country due to fire, how much more profound must be the grief and loss experienced by Indigenous peoples who have connection to country for innumerable generations!

Someone recently wrote to me to tell me their minister had written an article for their local paper declaring that these fires were God's wrath upon our land for the sins of abortion and homosexuality.

I suggested she remind him that Paul tells us, **"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death."** (Rom 8:1-2).

ALL the condemnation we deserved was poured out on Christ. Jesus bore our punishment so that we could be free.

It's a very old covenant way of thinking to suggest that natural disasters are God's way of punishing us.

God doesn't punish elderly couples or young families who've lost everything in the fires because other people are having abortions or because there are gay people in the world. What kind of God is that!

But having said that, I would agree that when natural disasters strike they can be a wake-up call, reminding us of things we have overlooked or forgotten. Grief and loss can be great (but terrible) teachers. In this instance, the fires have taught us that we haven't cared for the environment responsibly at all. These ravaging fires have reminded us of the need to address climate

change, to learn from ancient Aboriginal ways of using fire for land management, to pull together and help each other.

But in an appalling way these fires have also served to remind us of the terrors of losing your country, the horrors of displacement and dislocation, the grief of not feeling at home in the world anymore.

I don't think we are being punished by God, but I do think this bushfire season could be an opportunity for white Australians to begin to empathize with our Indigenous brothers and sisters, to discover something of the sense of displacement and trauma they continue to experience, and to reach out to each other to find a way forward in this scorched and devastated land.

by Michael Frost