

Sister Elizabeth Young – St Philip’s Collingwood – Sep 20 – 2020 – Seasons of Creation.

There’s so much in the readings today. Each one we could take and mull over and be challenged by and even confused by. But there are a few themes that stretch across these readings: God’s provision, God’s generosity, our trust, our gratitude and our work. And the overall theme for today brings them all together beautifully: There is enough for all our needs. And perhaps the call is for us to share in the fruitful labour that St Paul speaks about – to live a gospel life.

So that’s the homily in a nutshell. But to pad that out, Robert invited me to share some of my own story about working for Just Transitions. Before I start, just one thought about the landowner and the vineyard workers. There’s many ways to interpret this story, but I’ve been thinking of it in terms of generations being asked to work in the vineyard. Previous generations before us developed languages, ways of cultivating food, making clothing, housing structures, economic and governance structures, healthcare, technology. Is it fair that we take these as given? But we work now for today’s needs, and we build on what has come before: the knowledge, faith understanding, and understanding of privilege and isms like racism and sexism. Yet somehow, wherever we join the vineyard work, God treats us as individuals and communities who do what we can do. And it doesn’t need to be a battle of generation against generation, but now we are in God’s field together for the last hour, we can work together.

So my story is about living in Port Augusta, in north South Australia. When I went there, in 2011, it was beginning a time of transition. The main industry was two coal power stations, which provided hundreds of steady, direct jobs, and indirect jobs with coal mining and delivery. The town was proud of producing much of the energy needs of the whole state.

However, having a coal power plant in the backyard, and we could literally see it from our backyard, had its drawbacks. There was poor air quality, especially in the early years, from the dust and emissions. Even in my time, one of the Sisters who lived with us had skin irritations all of her 7-years there. Cancers and other health effects were linked to it, including the husband of the town’s mayor.

It was her advocacy that really got them started in a transition to a cleaner form of energy. Repower Port Augusta was formed. People had all different reasons for supporting the change: the power plant was aging, jobs were needed for the rural economy, environment groups thought it would have the biggest impact on climate change, and from a faith perspective, some of us saw it as part of Pope Francis’ call to create better living conditions for future generations of all of God’s creation.

The transition wasn’t easy or smooth, but it really is a story of hope. What gave me hope at the time was that it brought people together. The outside environment groups with the local action group. Healthcare workers with power station workers. In fact, the leader of the Repower group worked at the power station himself. Aboriginal elders spoke together with scientists of the value of fossil fuel free power. Church voices joined secular ones and major parties and minority members of government played a part, although I have to say that it was more due to proactive

business than government action. The local government level was the most effective and outspoken.

The community voted and 98% of the 4000 participants voted for solar over gas to replace the coal power stations. 80 people walked over 300kms from Port Augusta to Adelaide to promote the issue. I joined them in the first couple of days and from then on was an active member of the local group.

When I left at the end of 2016, one of the coal power station chimney stacks had been knocked over and the other was on its way. But there was no direct government effort to manage the transition. That could have been done so much better. But because of all the community support for new technology and Port Augusta's prime location, many renewable companies were starting up there. The big solar thermal generation plant that we had been promised didn't eventuate, but there was a solar thermal tomato greenhouse, wind farms, photo-voltaic solar and pumped hydro-electric power projects on the go – just in Port Augusta. In surrounding towns, like Whyalla, there were other big renewable energy projects too. My town was dubbed the 'Renewables capital of Australia' and when I recently spoke to my priest who still lives there, he said it was so positive for all the industries and jobs at the moment. The future was being created with a lot of hard work but also gratitude for these free gifts that God gives us: sun, wind and seawater.

So I tell this story when people wonder how rural towns will be affected by the transition from fossil fuels. I saw there what change looks like: the pain, the courage and the hope. I saw the rural qualities of resilience, hard work and strong community that perhaps city-dwellers can learn from. But what I took from it is the importance of working together, looking to the future, saying what we are for not what we are against. I think that something we can all take away is to think about those who will be affected by transitioning away from fossil fuels. How can we work with them and give them a future of hope? Of course, employment has been greatly affected by the COVID lockdowns too. And I heard recently that after the Great Depression, the government employed many people in planting trees in Australia. Perhaps we can be looking at this, at jobs in landcare in our economy of recovery and transition.

So I do believe that there is enough for all our needs. Like the Israelites we might need to learn to trust and work together, and play our part no matter how small. Together, encouraged by a generous God, we can adapt and thrive as custodians of our beautiful common home.