

Mateship: 'Imago Aussie'?

By Kerry Gubb

A few years ago a book was published about Australia, called *The Lucky Country*. Although the term found its way into our self-talk, we haven't been feeling so lucky lately. Early in 2011, in just one month:

- Flash floods inundated an area the size of France and Germany combined. Lives were lost, homes and crops destroyed.
- Cyclone Yasi ploughed across the Barrier Reef and the Queensland coast, leaving devastation in its wake.
- Raging bushfires took out homes and property on the edge of Perth.

It was a reminder that Australia is not a passive, easily tamed land. But when it does its worst to us, it seems to bring out the best in us. It also reminds me of why I'm so proud of my people.

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'We're Aussies: we stick together' is felt, spoken, and lived out every time this unbroken mustang of a land fights back with fire, wind, or water. It's a national psyche we call 'mateship'. Mateship is our word for a phenomenon highly influenced by our land, our accumulated culture, our history, and our experiences together. Mateship is the 'Aussie spirit'. It's the Aussies' self-image: 'imago Aussie'. If you ever visit here, you'll probably find yourself called 'mate' by total strangers. Consider it a compliment.

Uniquely Australian?

I'm as fiercely proud of mateship as anyone. I have to disagree, however, with some who think it's unique to our country. We might be more open about it, but Australians are not the only ones who come together in a crisis and rise to the challenge of a natural disaster. Each nation, each community, neighbourhood, family, and couple has its own variation on the same broad theme. They might call it something else, and they will

Volunteers from the South Australian Country Fire Service are among the Aussies who willingly help out their mates in times of disaster.

display it in ways that reflect their own history, culture, and experience. But mateship is common to all who are made in the image of God. Because God—Father, Son, and Spirit—is mateship: relationship, community, communion. God is whatever words we use in our own languages and cultural contexts to convey the concept of ‘You are in me and I am in you. We stick together. I will never leave you, nor forsake you’.¹

Here’s the difference, though. That’s how God is all the time. Always has been, always will be. Outgoing love: an orientation that Tom Smail, with the help of Pannenberg, calls ‘the exocentricity of our humanity’.² We’re not like God all the time. In fact, we’re not like him most of the time, are we? That’s because in us the image of God (*imago dei*) is distorted and hindered by our self-centred, egocentric orientation. Only in rare moments does ‘the exocentricity that constitutes our humanity’ break ‘through the egocentricity that defies and denies it’.³

So for most of the time, we live egocentrically, giving little thought for community, while doing our own thing, enabled by our egocentric, individualistic, materially affluent life-

style, and unaware of the family two doors down on our street.

Until there’s a flood.

Until there’s a cyclone or hurricane

Until there’s a fire.

Disasters are just that. Nobody enjoys them. But they do tend to awaken the smouldering embers of the exocentric image of God in us. That’s when we might just think that the family two doors down might need some help. And in the briefest of time, from a street full of proximate but functional strangers, emerges a new entity: a community of friends—mates—lending each other a hand.

There were countless comments from the grateful owners of flooded and wind-ravaged homes about how overwhelmed they were to have people they’d never actually met, helping them clear out the rubble and restore their lives. It was incredibly uplifting to see it. As it was in the wake of Katrina and Ike. As it was after the California wildfires and the Haiti earthquake. As it was after the Boxing Day tsunami, or as the world held its breath for the trapped Chilean miners. As it was when the Student Army, the F Army, and heaps of Cantabrians ‘mucked in’ to help shovel liquefaction, distribute

food, and go door-knocking after the Christchurch earthquakes.

I’m fiercely proud of the way my people have responded to the unprecedented natural disasters of the last few months. Why shouldn’t I be? I’m an Aussie. I can’t help reflecting, though, that such outgoing, ‘exocentric’ community spirit comes not just from the fact that we are cast from an Australian mould, but it is something we share with all humankind. The Son of God didn’t just make us⁴—he became one of us, and still is, and it is in him that all of us ‘live and move and have our being’.⁵

Mateship, when all is said and done, may be not so much ‘imago Aussie’ as it is *imago dei*—the fact that we are made in the image of the Triune God himself.

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Notes

¹ See Hebrews 13:5

² Tom Smail, *Like Father, Like Son: The Trinity Imaged in Our Humanity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005) p. 123

³ *Ibid.*, p. 124

⁴ Colossians 1:15-17

⁵ Acts 17:28



Queensland State Emergency Service volunteers are trained to rescue their ‘mates’ from rising flood waters.