

Homily for Parishes in the Western Region without clergy

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 23rd June 2019, Pentecost 2

Readings: **1Kings 19:1-4 (5-7) 8-15a**
Galatians 3:10-14, 23-29

Psalm 42 & 43
Luke 8:26-39

I'm pretty sure that you and I go to church for all kinds of reasons. We look forward to seeing people that we like and love, and to spending time with them. There may even be opportunity to meet and make some new friends. Sometimes in the hurly burly of busy living we may simply look forward to being in a cared for space, while articulating the familiar words of prayer and song. But, more than satisfying our need for human friendship, or a comfortable place, I hope we also anticipate some form of encounter with God?

The opening verses of today's Psalm express beautifully the human longing for encounter with God, and in the midst of our technologically rich, but relationally complex, world I think the words still resonate with many. *"As a deer longs for the running brooks: so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul is thirsty for God, thirsty for the living God: when shall I come and see your face?"* (Psalm 42:1-2).

I reckon Elijah would have been thinking something along these lines as he ran away from the violent retribution that had been promised him, as described in our Old Testament reading. He ran into the wilderness and longed to die rather than face the fury of those that he had upset. But, he did not die. In the midst of his wilderness experience he had a sense of encounter with God sustaining and directing him to journey to a mountain. Isolated from others, from the darkness of a cave he witnessed the noisy violence of wind, earthquake, and fire but did not find the voice of God in these. Instead, the voice and presence of God came subsequently in the sound of sheer silence.

If you, or I, have a current sense of being in some form of wilderness there is hope offered in this encounter between God and Elijah. Are we journeying in a wilderness, or, waiting in a cave? And, are we willing to risk silence, knowing that there is the real possibility of a life-changing encounter with God?

Because, for Elijah that encounter was life-changing. God did not direct him to leave the work he'd started, but told him to continue. God promised to be with Elijah in the uncomfortable reality of challenging corrupt and self-interested political leadership, and Elijah was sufficiently encouraged to re-engage. Elijah had previously lost his courage, but through this encounter it seems he found courage again.

So, have we lost courage in pursuing a good thing? Have we concluded that the odds against us are too great, and we've given up? Do we need be gently challenged and reminded by God about the part we have to play in making that 'good' happen?

Clearly the man that Jesus encountered in the Gospel today needed some 'good' to happen in his life because his mind was plagued by many things. He was feared and shunned by his community, and lived in the local cemetery. A man with no friends, and a man it seems with no hope of living in community again.

In a difficult account for friends in Kingaroy who are pig farmers, Jesus liberated the man from what crippled his life to such a degree that when the local community came to see what happened they found the man 'clothed and in his right mind'. Surely ongoing transformation and experiences of renewed life have also been part of our faith journey, and will continue to be.

Let's pray for this, and work this, in our individual lives, and in the ongoing life of our congregations and local communities. Let's pray and work for transformation and renewed life our society; and in the life of troubled nations far from where we live.

For those who watched the huge protests in Hong Kong over the last week there was inspiring footage of protesters singing the 1970's Christian worship song 'Sing Hallelujah to the Lord'. Christians and non-Christians alike. And from the feedback – it seems that time and again when things looked like they were about to deteriorate into conflict with the police people would start singing this song, and each time the situation calmed right down.

Imagine Elijah sing 'Sing Hallelujah to the Lord!' as he left the mountain to go back to his work of challenging unjust and self-interested leadership. Imagine the man who lived among the tombs singing that song as he returned to live in the midst of his community. And... imagine us singing that song as we continue to journey with the tough stuff of our lives, encouraged and empowered by the God whose name and nature is love.

If you know the tune, please sing it with me...

Sing 'Hallelujah!' to the Lord!
Sing 'Hallelujah!' to the Lord!
Sing 'Hallelujah!'
Sing 'Hallelujah!'
Sing 'Hallelujah!' to the Lord.

Let's pray...

God beyond naming, we give thanks for life and love; and for the work of your Spirit in our lives. We give thanks for the freedom to meet without fear in your name, and pray for your blessing on all who do not have this freedom. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen