

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 19th June 2022, 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 more than one reason. 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 midst of busy living, we may simply look forward to being in a cared for place, while articulating the familiar words of prayer and song. However, more than satisfying our need for human friendship, I hope we also come out of love for God.

The opening verses of today's Psalm beautifully express a human longing for God, and in the midst of our technologically rich and complex world, the words still resonate: *"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 think the prophet Elijah may have been thinking something along these lines as he ran away from the violent retribution that had been promised him, described in our Old Testament reading (1Kings 19:1-15a). He ran deep into the wilderness and longed to die, rather than face the fury of those that he had upset.

Let's not rush past that as if such a thing was insignificant: Elijah felt so overwhelmed by what was going on that he longed for his life to end. Elijah was in the physical wilderness of a desert – a place where it is hard to live; and he was in an emotional wilderness because powerful people wanted him dead; and there he was in a spiritual wilderness because Elijah really wasn't sure if God was with him or not!

In the complexity of these wilderness layers Elijah had a sense of God sustaining and guiding him to a mountain. Hiding in a cave he witnessed the violence of a strong wind, an earthquake, and a fire but in each these did not find the presence of God. Instead, this came subsequently in the sound of sheer silence.

That encounter for Elijah was clearly life-changing. God did not direct him to leave the work that he'd started, but instead told him to continue. God promised to be with Elijah in his uncomfortable call to challenge self-interested political leadership, and Elijah was reassured.

I wonder at this time if you or I have a sense of being so discouraged that we have given up thinking we can make the world a little better? Have we concluded that the odds are too great, and that no one else seems to care? Do we need to be gently challenged and reminded by God about the small, but vital contribution, we each have to make?

Clearly the man that Jesus encountered in today's Gospel (Luke 8:26-39) needed something 'good' to happen in his life because his mind was plagued by many things. He was feared and shunned by his community, he wore no clothes, and he lived in cemetery. A man who had no friends, and a man - it seems - who had no reason to hope.

Astonishingly, Jesus radically changed his life, and he liberated the man to such a degree that when the local community came to see what had happened they found the formally feared man, *'clothed, and in his right mind'*.

Human experience can include times of psychological, emotional, and spiritual wilderness. Trauma can cause this, and sickness; being bullied can cause this, and loneliness; being unemployed can cause this, and addiction; grief can cause this, and loss. In such wilderness places we can feel overwhelmed, powerless, and unable to keep going.

Last Sunday afternoon I was with a congregation who are very familiar with different forms of wilderness, having been forced from the country of their birth because of war. At a combined Dinka congregation service we prayed and sang, listened to Bible readings, and reflected on a sermon offered in two languages.

We also had the joy of welcoming two friends who had safely returned from visiting relatives in Uganda and South Sudan. One of these was a grandmother and when she was invited to share she asked the musicians to play and she started to sing a hymn. The congregation joined her in singing, and then she

started to dance. This caused some people to smile as they sang because she is no longer young, but some rose to dance with her.

When we finished singing the hymn she said that she had visited her family in a Ugandan refugee camp and that life for them was hard. Sometimes there was only one meal a day, and there was little water available for washing. As she spoke the congregation listened and nodded for most of them have family in similar situations. But, she said that she had seen her family singing the same hymn we had just sung, and dancing joyfully – trusting that God was with them each day. She suggested that when life was hard in Australia we should do the same... and all of us clapped in agreement.

Like Elijah in that long ago mountain cave WE may need to seek God's voice in silent prayer – until, like Elijah, we know we are not alone in the journey we travel, and that God is with us every step of the way. Or, like that long ago naked man in the cemetery WE may need a spiritual liberation that restores us to ourselves, and to community. Or, like the wise woman who spoke last weekend, WE may need to sing songs of faith and... dance!

Let's pray...

God of transformation and hope, we give thanks for life and love, and for the work of your Spirit in our lives. We lift to you all who live with some form of wilderness and pray for your blessing upon them, in the name of Christ. Amen.