

1 Kings 19: 1-4, 8-15a
Pss 42, 43
Galatians 3: 10-14, 23-29
Luke 8: 26-39

May our hearts and minds be open to the transforming Christ. Amen.

In early May I went to Hobart. It is the city of my birth and holds many memories for me. I went to take the funeral of my mother's closest friend, Marjorie. She had been like a second mother to me and her daughter, Judy, has been a close friend for the last 45 years. When my mother drove me nuts, Marjorie was there for me. When Marjorie drove Judy nuts, my mother was there for her. Looking back, I suspect that my mother and Marjorie often had long conversations about their headstrong daughters!

Each time I go back to Hobart I see it differently. New shards of perception, experience and memory cut through the mental and emotional picture I carry with me of the place I lived for the first 21 years of my life, causing me to re-create my images of it. Someone might say something about our school years, something I hadn't remembered or known, which makes me change my ideas about a particular teacher or another student. The weather might evoke a long-forgotten memory, or a glimpse of a place not visited for 40 years remind me of a family picnic in the 1960s.

This time the shift was very marked. Marjorie was the last of my mother's generation whom I knew well. Somehow, with the passing of that generation in Hobart, the emotional landscape of the place has changed enormously for me.

When I was young I imagined that by the time I was 30 I would have worked everything out and be settled into a comfortable pattern. Nothing could have been further from the truth! As my experience of the last few months vividly shows. As human beings, part of what we do as we journey through life is constantly sift and sort, often unconsciously, through the way we see the world.

Most of us make physical journeys throughout our lives – moving house, moving states or even countries, adapting to new places and new people. Even if we don't move geographically, even if we are born, live and die in the very same house, then there is still an internal journey that happens as we grow up, grow older, and change our way of seeing and understanding the world.

Our spiritual lives are no different – we do not stand still. As we pray, study, worship, spend time with others, we have new experiences, new insights, all of which we sift through and sort. The new experiences and insights happen in different ways and affect us differently. If, like St Paul, you have had a dramatic experience of conversion, you are probably very aware of the

sudden difference it makes in your life. St Paul describes this experience very vividly calling the post-conversion world a 'new creation'. It is as if you see everything in a totally new way – through the lens of the knowledge of God's great love for you. At one level, nothing has changed: trees are still trees, houses are still houses, your sister is still your sister. But at another level, everything has changed and you suddenly see the world, as Gerard Manley Hopkins described it: 'charged with the grandeur of God'.

Not everyone has these dramatic moments of shifting understanding. For many there is a more gradual unfolding of love and commitment, a gentler journey towards the fullness of God – an amble down a hillside, rather than a fall off the cliff, or a Sunday afternoon drive rather than a Formula 1 race.

The Old Testament reading and the Gospel reading today give us glimpses of these two types of experience – the sudden transforming encounter and the moment of deepening along an already committed path.

Elijah was already a man of God, a prophet committed to preaching God's truth, but in the reading today we hear of an encounter with God which leads to Elijah being taken still more deeply into faith. There is a sense in this text of faith almost becoming a verb – through being faithful, through experiencing belief, so a deeper experience of God takes place.

By the sound of things, Elijah was feeling a bit vulnerable as he sought God's guidance for the next step. There he is, holding the line for God in a very hostile environment, feeling isolated because all the other prophets have been killed and he is next in the firing line. But rather than walk away from God, rather than seek his own immediate personal safety, he waits to hear from God. And gosh – does he wait! Divine guidance does come ... eventually. After waiting through storm, through earthquake and through fire, he finally hears God in 'sheer silence'. His journey of faith continues – a physical journey as well as a spiritual journey – and God's faithfulness in responding to him has further reinforced Elijah's faith.

In the Gospel reading, on the other hand, we see an encounter with Jesus bringing a dramatic transformation of someone's life – a madman is brought back to his right mind, to wholeness of spirit, by the action of Jesus. It is hard to imagine a more startling change – to see someone who had been totally out of his mind, naked and living in a graveyard, completely healed of his madness. Understandably, this complete turnaround in his life leads him to want to stay close to Jesus, the source of his healing, but he too, like Elijah, is sent away. In this case Jesus sends him off to tell others about what has happened to him.

Like Elijah, like the man in the Gospel reading, new experiences, new encounters with God, are points along the way – they are not the end of the spiritual journey. Elijah is sent on to Damascus, the newly sane man to tell others. Their lives of faith continued. We too continue to be constantly changed, moulded, transformed by our encounters with God, through prayer,

through sacrament, through study of the scriptures, through the examples of others.

The journey of faith is full of surprises, of moments of insight and growth. It is a journey that depends on God's actions but also on ours. The journey has points of decision and intentional commitment. Tobias' baptism on Pentecost was a wonderful and inspiring example of such a point of commitment.

For most of us here, much of the spiritual journey happens in the context of church. We are all nurtured, sustained and challenged by the church. With all its faults, its hesitations, its distortions, its sheer humanity, the church is the group of people committed to intentional discipleship, intentional spiritual growth as followers of Christ. Through being connected to church, either as deeply committed members, hangers-on or something in between, we are connected not just to each other – to this particular group of people at this particular time, but to all those who seek to live as disciples of Christ.

The Galatians reading talks to us about the nature of Christian community. It speaks of the transformation that comes through encountering God in the sacrament of baptism.

Through baptism, we are brought more deeply into relationship with God and with each other - a relationship which is not based on any of the categories we usually use to order our relationships: race, gender, social status.

This reading is challenging. I am always aware of how often we don't actually manage to live like this – how the structures of the church itself seem to entrench division along gender lines, how the church over the centuries has been racist (either consciously or unconsciously), of the kowtowing to the upper classes that has so often happened despite Jesus' focus on the wellbeing of the poorest and humblest in society.

And yet, the church is the body of people which has kept alive the stories of faith, the story of our relationship with God. Our faults seems so often to be on public display and we are critiqued as a group for the failings of a few. But little is said about the mutual support and teaching, about the lives of service and prayer that are nurtured within the life of the church. But as together we share in the sacraments, in prayer, and in service, so our spiritual journeys are enriched. We learn from each other, and through the structures and teachings of the church, from those who have gone before us.

Our Belonging & Caring Team is hosting morning tea this morning with an intentional focus on nurturing our relationships with each other. We would like to inspire and encourage you to talk with some people you don't really know – ask them how they are, offer to pray for each other, ask how long they've been coming to Holy Covenant (even if you think you know!).

Let us journey together, companions on the road, rejoicing in each other and in the transformation of our lives that is going on – sometimes dramatically, sometimes almost surreptitiously, as we encounter God and are led ever more deeply into a greater knowledge and love of God. Amen.