



The gift of memory

By Fr Vince Casey

I have just been appointed Parish Priest at Our Lady Star of the Sea, Terrigal. Everything is new—the church, the people, my home. Yet, in another sense, much is familiar. It's familiar because I carry with me so many memories of this Diocesan community of Broken Bay over the course of my priestly life. There is a thread of continuity, even though each parish is unique.

This led me to reflect on the power of memory. Christians are people of memory. The Scriptures, the Eucharist, are all about remembering. Each of us is shaped by our memories.

Some of my most treasured memories are very early ones: like Mum teaching me to pray “Angel of God, my guardian dear...” and Dad explaining the Mass to me. As a seminarian I found our Creator in the bush and the beach, and I still go to nature to connect with God.

Just before I was ordained, I did an Antioch weekend. I remember thinking: “If this is Church, I want to be part of it!” It led to many more extraordinary faith memories, like parish prayer meetings packed with 80-100 youth, week after week. How could I ever forget that?! It shaped me as a priest and showed me what was possible.

I love being with my people in ministry: rejoicing with a couple as they are married, and later as their baby is baptised; helping a family to farewell their Dad; sitting with new parents and their still-born child; celebrating reconciliation where a burden carried for years is released; regular Mass with people who so love the Eucharist. Memories like these have sustained me at those times when my appointment has taken me away from parish ministry. And if I ever wonder if my life is worthwhile, they remind me of the immense value of being a diocesan priest.

Scripture is a big part of my prayer. One time when I was feeling depressed, Psalm 42 spoke powerfully in a moment of grace: *“Why are you cast down my soul, why groan within me. Hope in God. I will praise him still, my saviour and my God”*. Now, whenever there is a hint of the blues, I go to this Psalm. That Scripture memory continues to heal me.

In homily preparation, I often search my memories for a suitable story to share. This week, the first reading is about Abraham and the sacrifice of his son. What life stories come to mind? I remember long ago grieving the child I would never have when I said ‘Yes’ to celibacy; I remember helping a couple prepare the funeral of their son... I find myself ‘sifting’ my life, seeking an example of the living word that might speak to my people on a Sunday.

I have been blessed with some very deep experiences of the risen Lord, especially on retreat. But there was a ten year stretch when my prayer was a barren, desert experience. I felt alone. God seemed absent. I was committed to my ministry, yet felt I was just going

through the motions. My memories of God's grace and love and joy were vital in those years. They sustained me. They helped me to trust that the joy and energy would return. And it did!

The Transfiguration (this week's Gospel) must have been a powerful experience for Jesus. The memory of God's outpouring of love would have sustained him as he headed back—down the mountain, on to Jerusalem, to the cross.

As a priest I am often 'with' people in the most important events of their lives. My hope is that I can be part of creating lifegiving memories of Church for each person I encounter; memories that will support them through their difficulties and open them up to grace. I look forward to the memories we will make together at Terrigal.