

Pentecost 4C, 20th June, 2010

1 Kings 19: 1-15a

The Sound of Sheer Silence

God's Stories

I want to take you on a journey today, walking with the prophet Elijah towards something which for him was life changing, something which revealed God to him in a new and different way.

As we hear this story today, we see and hear our own stories, and the stories of people we care about where their stories join ours. And we listen for how God meets *us* in *this* story.

Elijah

Elijah was in trouble – serious trouble. From an all time high, flushed with success and victory, he was suddenly catapulted into insecurity and threat. He'd been turning out to be one of the greatest prophets – perhaps the greatest figure of faith since Moses. This was a time when God's people were turning to worship pagan Gods under the influence of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, and where the prophets of the Hebrew God were being persecuted and killed. But the prophet Elijah was fearless in his condemnation and challenging of all that was against the one true God. The provisions of God for him, and the spectacular miracles performed under his hand for the one true God of Israel were legendary: ravens feeding him in the wilderness, a never-emptying jar of meal and jug of oil for the widow of Zaraphaph, the raising to life of her dead son. And in what was his most supreme challenge to the Baal-worshipping King and Queen, in a contest of strength with the prophets of Baal, he called down fire on the sacrificial altar before killing all 450 of these prophets

At the defeat and slaughter of her favoured prophets of Baal, Jezebel was furious. Incensed. Where we meet up with her and Elijah today in our reading, Elijah has just received word that she's coming after him to kill him. What does this great, triumphant man of God do? This man who only days before declared the power of the Lord as greater than the king, greater than the god Baal? He turns tail and runs; overwhelmed with fear of this threat from Jezebel. And even more than this, he appears to be exhausted and in despair. His boundless energy and undoubtable faith seem to dissipate and turn into depression and an overwhelming sense of failure. He retreats further, feeling that life is nothing for him. There are no hints that he's fallen from God's favour; nothing to suggest that he's gone against God. But here he is, miserable and abject. Depressed. He pleads with God to take his life.

In his flight from Jezebel and from his life, he moves to journey to the most holy place of Israel, to the original place where God revealed himself to Moses:

Horeb or Mt Sinai, the place where Moses met God with a burning bush, the place where the ten commandments were given, and where God's covenant was made with Israel. This is a pilgrimage of despair mingled with hope. It doesn't seem like this is a planned movement; it seems more instinctual, driven by his brokenness, his doubt about his calling and a longing for God's presence.

What happens? On the way, God's angel feeds him, encourages him to eat and sleep and gain strength for the journey. And so Elijah arrives at the mountain, forty days and nights later (that biblical number symbolising a span of time it takes to accomplish something sacred).

Let's stop for a moment and reflect; catch where your story might meet with Elijah's: here we have a man, a person who has been caught up in the heart of undoubted service to God, trying his best at doing his work, and with no question about his faith here; and whilst all has been well, an obstacle, a turn of events, a threat to his well being and security, throws him into an unexpected state of fear, uncertainty and depression. The strength and resilience he has known before seems to just disappear, evaporate into thin air. Instinctively, he moves towards God. In this part of his story he is nourished by those whom God sends to care for him. But his melancholy remains, and with providential care sustaining him, he presses on to meet God.

Now here he is on the mountain, expecting to meet God. And God's there, just as he has been along the way. It's hard to capture the depth of Elijah's aching for God – there's a sense here that he hasn't been able to recognise that God in fact hasn't left him, that God has been with him along the way. "What are you doing *here*, Elijah?", God asks. Elijah pours out his bitter disappointment and woes. And here's where the extraordinary happens. "Watch for me" says God, in response. As we read "*there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.*".

The sound of sheer silence, or as some translations have it, the sound of low murmuring, a still, small voice. There is something so commanding in this silence that there can be no doubt of God's presence. Nature's most powerful elements are rendered as nothing in comparison; internal turmoil is quieted in this stillness. Elijah covers his face: a mark of recognition and acquiescence: for, as was told to Moses, no-one can look upon the face of the Lord and live. Here on this mountain, where God previously had made himself known in fiery, spectacular ways, God is being known in this sheer silence; the still, small voice of God being experienced by a man whose work for God has been loud

and spectacular and fiery. God brings Elijah – and us - fresh and startling news: breaking through the intensity and clamour of internal anguish, the power of God is found in the whispering, murmuring quiet. Elijah leaves the mountain, to continue his calling as prophet in a new way: less spectacular, with success taking longer and evolving in quieter, more gradual ways.

Our Stories

Where does your story meet with Elijah's? Hold onto what is resonating with you; we'll have some moments silence now, before I move on to finish, to allow that to speak to you.

When the going's tough, we long for the unmistakable presence of God with us and we look for that, and we look for his direction for our lives, hoping that it comes to us so clearly that we can't mistake it. But the still, small voice of God, showing us the way, speaking to us of a new way of being, can be drowned out by the deafening roar of our life's trials, and can be obscured by the busy-ness we create to avoid the pain we fear might come through being still.

I'm challenged to want to reassure you, to say that the still, small voice of God is there, is real, and is speaking in the sheer silence under whatever those struggles are. To say, don't be afraid of the silence or of being still: even though there could well be pain, God is there. Welcome it and listen. There is peace behind the turmoil.

We mightn't be great and fiery prophets, used to spectacular signs and manifestations of God. But we are people of God, given life through Christ and holding God's Spirit within us, doing our best to serve him in whatever walks of life he has drawn us into. Underneath the winds and earthquakes and fires of life, the struggles and heaviness of heart, this loving murmuring of God is ever present – speaking to us, moving us into his absolute stillness; the sound of sheer silence where our spirits and minds are quietened, where we can hear him and experience him unmistakably; and we are sent forward once again to live the life he has for us.