

*The sound of silence*

It is not what we might have expected: the prophet Elijah, champion of the true God of Israel, scourge of the false gods and their prophets, is a depressed, despairing man. He should, after all, be on a high. He should be on a roll. So what's happened? What's gone wrong? You may recall Elijah's burden, that the people of Israel were straying from worship of the true God and flirting with the fertility God of Baal, the God of the Canaanites. And a few weeks ago we learnt how high up on Mount Carmel Elijah had challenged Baal and his prophets to a contest to decide who was the true God - Baal? Or the God of Israel? And by calling on the God of Israel to send down lightning to ignite a burnt offering, a feat that Baal utterly failed to do, Elijah had proved who was the true and living God, and the prophets of Baal had been slaughtered. That was some victory, the high point of Elijah's career.

The problem was however that it had created enemies, powerful enemies - not least the King of Israel, Ahab, and his Queen, Jezebel. Jezebel was from the land of Canaan and she worshipped and encouraged Israel to worship Baal, and not surprisingly she and Ahab were not well pleased to find her god humbled and her prophets slain. So our passage begins with a threat by Jezebel to kill Elijah, and you might have thought that Elijah would have laughed at such a threat. After his great triumph on Mt Carmel you might have thought that such a threat would run off him like rain off a mountain. But no. Elijah implodes. He flees for his life and journeys into the wilderness, where he sits down beneath a broom tree and prays, 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' And he falls asleep and he awaits death.

So how do we account for Elijah's collapse? What happened? Well, it's a fascinating question. I think the answer might come down partly to character - Elijah does seem at times to be something of an Eeyore, with a tendency to feel sorry for himself. When faced with the contest with the prophets of Baal Elijah was heard to exclaim dramatically, 'I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord...!' - as if he were the only one left true to God, when in fact there were many more faithful prophets besides him. And now he repeats that refrain in this chapter: 'I alone am left, and they are seeking my life...' And maybe Elijah was prone to that kind of self-pity and it affected him now in the

aftermath of his great victory. And it may be significant too that Elijah laments, ‘I am no better than my ancestors!’ He feels small and inadequate beside the great heroes of the past like Moses and there may be issues here of low self-esteem. Perhaps Elijah suffered from some sort of inferiority complex. And what fascinating territory for psychologists and counsellors as this episode touches on so much human experience – the dark side of human experience.

One way of considering it is simply to say that Elijah was depressed – not that he was just a bit down as we all are from time to time, but that Elijah experienced real clinical depression. And the fact that he was a man of God who spoke for God and fought God’s battles evidently did not in any way protect him from the darkness of that despair. Or perhaps he was what we call today bi-polar, prone to great high Mt Carmel moments, only to come crashing down to deep, deep wilderness lows – like now. And so we recognise the poignant mystery of how such depression and bi-polarity can co-exist with faith and a relationship with God, as it surely can. And tragically, for Elijah such depression seems to have rendered him suicidal – ‘take away my life!’, he cries. And the fact that such a man of God was prone to suicidal urgings should judge us for our heartless and uncompassionate treatment of suicides in the past – refusing to bury them in consecrated ground and all the shameful rest of it.

So Elijah’s collapse confronts us with this dark, shadowy, fearful side of human nature, though we do not gain much insight or many answers to this condition through his experience. Except that when we read on we find that in this depressed state an angel comes and touches him and tells him to eat and to drink the provisions the angel has brought him. And there is such tenderness and compassion in that moment. And whatever else we learn about depression we are reminded here how small acts of human kindness – a meal provided – can ease the pain. Most importantly, however, we see here how God is present in the pain: invisible, perhaps, yet present in the darkness, present in the death-wish, holding us in those moments of despair. And so the Spirit of life at work – even if finally we cannot help but choose death.

So Elijah’s experience brings to mind the psychological realm of mental distress and illness. But there may too be a spiritual dimension to this. We may possibly see in Elijah what mystics and contemplatives speak of as ‘the dark night of the soul.’ What this refers to is a stage on the journey of faith when a sense of God’s presence and light gives way to a profound sense of darkness and abandonment. So the 19<sup>th</sup> century French Carmelite nun Therese of Lisieux

reportedly told her fellow nuns, 'If only you knew what darkness I am plunged into.' And note – we are not talking here about the kind of blip in our spiritual lives that we often encounter. We are talking about something experienced by those who have waded deep into that ocean which is God and who now find themselves floundering. It was an experience that Mother Teresa of Calcutta spoke of towards the end of her life. In a very revealing book called, appropriately enough, 'Come be my light' she shocked many people by saying, 'I have no Faith - I dare not utter the words and thoughts that crowd in my hear - and make me suffer untold agony.' And again, 'Such deep longing for God and ... repulsed empty no faith no love no zeal. ... Heaven means nothing pray for me please that I keep smiling at Him in spite of everything.' Here is someone who had journeyed far into God and who now found only darkness and silence. Perhaps Elijah experienced something of that. Or, on a different yet related tack, we may see here in Elijah's malaise the reality of what we call spiritual warfare – the fact that when you engage at the frontline with dark powers and forces, as Elijah had done on Mt Carmel, there may be a cost to bear, for this is dangerous territory and it may leave us spiritually spent.

Well, whatever the nature of Elijah's condition, he is now summoned to stand on the mountain and what follows is series of encounters in which he might expect to meet God. First there is wind, and God's spirit is like a wind - except that God is not in this wind. And there follows an earthquake, and Israel had experienced God in earthquakes, but not this time. And similarly with the fire that follows – God is not there. And then follows this strange experience, 'the sound of sheer silence' as our translation puts it. What is that all about – 'the sound of sheer silence'? The old King James Version of the Bible refers to 'a still small voice', but let's be clear. Elijah is not hearing the voice of God. God is not whispering to him softly, in contrast to the noise of the earthquake and the wind and the fire. No. God is not speaking at all. God is silent, perhaps just when Elijah most needs to hear God speak.

We need to probe this a bit further. And we need to consider the nature of this silence that engulfs Elijah for, you see, there are different kinds of silence. Think about it. There is, for example, the silence when there is simply nothing there, nothing to stir or make a sound. That is an empty silence. But there are other kinds. Think, for example, of the start of our worship when we have a moment of silence. What kind of silence is that? It might be described as the silence of anticipation, of waiting for something to happen, knowing that

something is about to start. And in that silence we may become aware of one another, that we are not alone – indeed we might become aware of the presence of God in our midst. In other words it is not an empty silence – it is more of a pregnant pause. It's a silence that speaks.

In recent times no-one has written more powerfully about the silence and the absence of God than the Welsh poet R S Thomas. And the thing about Thomas is that he knows that silence and absence are not always what they appear. Just as there is a kind of a silence that is poised, anticipating, waiting to break, so there is a kind of absence that hints at a presence, because someone or something is just beyond reach. I've printed part of one of his poems on our service sheet this morning. It's called *The Absence* and I'd quote it here;

It is this great absence  
that is like a presence, that compels  
me to address it without hope  
of a reply. It is a room I enter  
  
from which someone has just  
gone, the vestibule of the arrival  
of one who has not yet come...

I'd suggest that was what Elijah experienced: the absence of God. But it is not abandonment! It's the absence of an elusive God who has just left the room or is just about to enter and who thus conveys a trace of presence. It's a silent God, but it's not an empty silence. It's more of a pregnant pause. And not surprisingly the silence is broken as God finally speaks: 'what are you doing here, Elijah?' And from there Elijah begins to live again.

God's silence. God's absence. I wonder if you know what that is all about. I wonder if you long sometimes to meet God clearly and distinctly, to be over-whelmed by God: in the wind, in the earthquake, in the fire - but no. It doesn't happen, maybe when you need it most. Maybe it is in those dark places of depression and despair and loss that Elijah knew all about that you long for the presence of God, yearn for a word from God - but no. Only silence. Only absence.

Well, consider this. In Jesus Christ we as Christians believe that God has become present with us once and for all. And as Christians we believe that in Jesus Christ, God's Word, God has spoken once and for all. So whatever of God's absence you experience it is not the absence of abandonment. And whatever of God's silence you experience it is not an empty silence. It is the

absence of one who is at hand, just out of reach. It is the silence of waiting, of anticipation, the pregnant pause that will give birth to something new. So have faith. Hold on. Amen.

O holy and loving God,  
eternal Maker and Saviour of all,  
we praise and bless your holy name.  
You are the Almighty God,  
the God who comes in the earthquake,  
the God who blows in the wind,  
the God who would burn us in the  
pure holy fire of your love.  
And yet you are too the God who comes  
and speaks softly and gently to us  
in your frail, fragile word to us in Jesus Christ.  
In him you have bound yourself to us forever,  
and in him you have spoken once and for all  
words of forgiveness and grace and peace.  
God forgive us that we resist your presence with us.  
Forgive us that we resist your word, turning a deaf ear.

Forgive us for our sins and failures.  
Come, Lord Jesus,  
come once more and speak your word of reassurance  
to us that we are loved.  
Come and raise us up,  
And feed and nourish us with living bread  
and the water of life  
and so give us strength for our journey.  
We pray in Jesus' name  
and in the words that he taught us, saying...