

1 Kings 19: 1-15a; Luke 8:26-39

23.06.19

Depression, the darkness and the deep

What are we to make of the dejected and despairing figure of Elijah that we are presented with in our reading this morning from the 1st book of Kings? Here is a man who should be on a high rather than in the depths of despondency. He should be on a roll. So what's happened? What's gone wrong?

Well – briefly – the prophet Elijah had a burden, and that was that his people Israel were straying from worship of the true God and flirting with a fertility God by the name of Baal. And in the previous chapter Elijah had challenged Baal and his prophets to a contest high up on a mountain 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 and scattered. 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 herself worshipped Baal 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 that. After his great triumph over the prophets of Baal you might have thought that such a threat would run off him like rain off a rock. 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.

What seems evident is that we have here a man who is deeply depressed, so depressed that he is entertaining suicidal thoughts and wishing himself dead. And faced with this passage, and in an attempt to do justice to it, I would like - with some trepidation – to touch this morning on the subject of depression, that awful, debilitating condition that afflicts so many people in many different forms. And I begin with a disclaimer: I am blessed in that I have never really been afflicted with depression. Yes, I have my down days. I have my sleepless nights. But what Elijah is suffering is more than that and

something that some of you of you will be all too familiar with: what Winston Churchill called his ‘black dog’, that fog which descends and saps life out of you, and isolates you, and can lead eventually to self-harm and even suicide. And from what little I know of depression, there would seem to be clear signs of it in Elijah, three familiar features that we might note.

Firstly, this affliction comes after a period of great stress and strain and, as we’ve noted, a considerable high. Elijah had single-handedly taken on the assembled multitude of Baal’s prophets, dangerous people who Elijah had put the to the test and defeated and dispersed – and the question is where do you go from there? What do you do for an encore? Many successful people know only too well the way that highs can sometimes be followed by profound and desperate lows.

Then secondly, and a recurring feature of depression it would seem, there is a sense of low self-esteem and self-regard, a feeling of worthlessness. Listen again to Elijah: ‘It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.’ It would seem that Elijah is comparing himself here to previous heroes of his nation: people like Moses and Joshua, and he feels that he comes up short.

And thirdly, there is a distorted and negative perception of the world, a mis-reading of reality. Elijah has a misguided sense that he alone remains faithful to the God of Israel, that everyone else has forsaken God, and so he feels sorry for himself there is self-pity. And Elijah needs to be reminded by God that there are seven thousand other pairs of knees that have not bowed to Baal, and that he is not alone. He is misreading the situation.

But that brings me to a related subject, that of loneliness. I was interested to read a report that has come out this week called The Sainsbury’s Living Well Index, which regularly researches and compiles information about social health and wellbeing in Britain. The latest report concludes that the UK’s sense of wellbeing has continued to decline as it has since 2017 when the research began. People eat together less, part of a wider significant drop in social contact, and the research also pinpointed a year-on-year decline in the quality of sleep. Overall the report paints a picture in the UK of rising social disconnect and loneliness, of work stress and excess screen time, and of many individuals experiencing a significant crisis in mental health. And what are we to make of the fact that in 2018 Prime Minister Theresa May appointed a Minister of loneliness, to tackle the social and health issues caused by social

isolation? Here we are, supposedly more connected than ever through social media, with rising problems of isolation and loneliness requiring a government department – in the UK. And I suspect the UK is not alone here. All of which, perhaps, contributes to the incidents of depression and threatens to make Elijahs of us all.

So what are we as Christians to say of depression? What can be said that might be helpful? And the first thing to note is that there is a stigma associated with depression in Christians. After all, aren't we supposed to all be joyful? Aren't we people of hope – buoyant people who have God with us? And can we therefore admit to being blanketed by despair? Well, here I want to give some sort of biblical perspective on depression, one that I hope can counter such prejudice. And to get some sort of a biblical perspective, let me take you right back to the beginning of the Bible, to Genesis chapter 1, where we read of the creation of the universe. and the chapter opens by saying that when God began to create 'the earth was formless and void and darkness covered the face of the deep...' The picture here is of a surging, threatening, watery deep shrouded in darkness – a raging, dark and destructive storm. And as we read on we find that the spirit or wind of God swept over the face of the deep and tamed it. The spirit divides the deep into waters above and waters below and in between God inserts an arena for creation: a zone of land and sea and vegetation and, eventually life and then human life. And so that dark, threatening deep is held back and restrained from destroying the earth, indeed it is channelled into rainfall from above and streams and rivers bubbling up from below so that it brings life to the earth rather than death. That deep, however, hovering at the edge of creation is always a threat. It can always breach its bounds. It can always invade Gods creation as it does in the story of the flood that follows later in Genesis. There deep which has been tamed and constrained bursts its bounds and engulfs the world. And that deep, that darkness, is always there on the edge of life, threatening to pounce. Jesus encountered it in his ministry. He encountered it in the storm on the lake which he stilled, and he encountered it in the demoniacs and the possessed who he healed – like the one we read about in Luke's gospel earlier, this man called Legion. His life has been invaded by the darkness. His demons represent the power of the deep broken loose in his life. And Jesus heals him. And how does he heal him? Well, by sending the demons back to the deep from whence they came. Jesus casts

them into swine who rush down into the lake - from the deep you came and to the deep you return.

Now this is a biblical picture of the world that we must take seriously. There is a deep. There is a darkness at the edge of town, as Bruce Springsteen puts it. There is a darkness at the edge of things which threatens to suck the life out of us. And we see it on a global scale in the threat of war and in all that kills and we see it at the human scale in lives caught in vicious circles of violence and conflict and harm. And poverty allows the darkness in, and so does social isolation and breakdown and loneliness all the things highlighted in that report about the UK. And the darkness penetrates in mental distress. And it creeps in under the door of our lives like a fog and settles in depression. And the darkness is a part of human life and Christians are as exposed to it as anyone – maybe more so, I don't know – and there is no shame in that.

So what is the solution? Well, there are no simple answers or remedies. Depression is a complex illness and requires varieties of treatment. But I am struck by two features of the passage. First, we read that Elijah was summoned out onto the mountain where he encountered all the usual ways we might expect to meet God and indeed how Moses had encountered God on that very mountain years before – in wind and earthquake and fire. Here is the power and majesty of God displayed. Here are all the ways in which we might try to snap Elijah out of his depression, to overcome it by force of will and but the power of persuasion. But these do nothing and God is not in them. But then comes 'the sound of sheer silence'. 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 and lessen the sense of loneliness and isolation. You see, in the depths of the darkness people often do not want words and they may not want company, and that must be respected. But we can find ways to express the silence of solidarity, and to show practically that we care and that the sufferer is loved.

Depression, the darkness, the deep. There are no simple remedies. But do not underestimate the power of love and of knowing that we are loved. This is the heart of the Gospel. 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...