

1 Kings 19. 1 – 15a

Luke 8. 26-39

‘I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.’

Elijah is having a crisis of faith. He believed he had done the right thing, slaying 450 prophets of Baal. But now he is not so sure. ‘It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.’

But in his plaintive cry: *I alone am left*, is a question to God: didn’t you need me God; what would you do without me. Surely, you needed me to protect your name, ensure your worship. I eradicated all those false prophets; those unbelievers, those infidels, backsliders, sinners, heretic. Surely, I am the only faithful one? *I alone am left*.

In his anguish Elijah suggests himself to God as a kind of victim. Look what I have done for you God; now the wicked Queen wants rid of me. In his fear he flees and finds himself driven to reconsider who this God whom he has sought to protect is. The collapse of all he has been certain about drives Elijah to a place of desolation and abandonment.

Get up and eat; otherwise, the journey will be too much for you. Forty days and forty nights he goes; forty; the blueprint for transformation where all is stripped away so that a new identity might replace it; Elijah’s forty days echoing the forty-year journey of the Israelite slaves through the desert; foreshadowing Jesus forty days and nights in the wilderness. Tested; refined, stripped bare of all pretence and delusion about himself and who God might be.

AT the beginning of the gospel of Mark we hear that the spirit throws Jesus into the wilderness, where he is tested. Jesus’ testing in the wilderness echoes Elijah’s testing; likewise, a kind of being thrown into the wilderness against his will; he seems to have no choice; no other option; no solution of last resort. He is stripped of all his certainty; all his evangelical bravado. And he is ministered to by angels, as Matthew and Mark tell us angels minister to Jesus through his forty days in the wilderness.

Elijah’s destination is not immediately obvious to us. He goes to Mount Horeb; we know it as Mount Sinai; the place where Moses is given the law. This is also the mountain on which Moses first encounters the bush which burns but is not consumed. There God gives the divine name. When Moses asks to know God’s name, who can I say to the Israelite slaves in Egypt has sent me, all God gives Moses is *I am who I am; I will be who I will be – this is my name forever*. This divine name is a name which defies all our certainties about God, and so about who we might seek to be as servants of God.

In this encounter of Elijah at the cave we find him facing the fundamental religious question and making the fundamental religious mistake; that we can know the nature and intention of God; know the mind of God. *I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts;*

This is the challenge which Adama, the man of dust, faces in the garden East of Eden. The temptation in eating of the fruit is believing we can know the mind of God. Elijah has believed he has known the mind of God: *I alone am left*.

The history of the church is full of odious sorts who thought they knew the mind of God and acted with great violence against body and soul: the crusaders, the misogynists who believed, still believe, women are second-order human beings; the sanctimonious condemning unwed mothers, gay people; the ones who want to believe that God is white; the ones who want to wage war, claiming that God is on their side. What are you doing here, Elijah? It is a question for all of us when we are puffed up with religious certainty: What are you doing here? Our communities are full of people who have walked away from the church and the religiously certain, driven away by judgementalism and rigidity.

We might ask ourselves: what certainty are we looking for? What certainty makes us deaf to the sound of sheer silence?

We hope for God to speak to us loud and clear, in earthquake, wind and fire; to leave us without a doubt as to God's will for us or the situations we might find ourselves in. But if we are able to listen, to truly listen, ultimately there is silence. We want clarity; but often it does not come. In many ways the silence at the cross is an echo of the same silence which surrounds Elijah.

The English writer W. Somerset Maugham made the quip about Christianity: *poor, talkative little Christianity*. We Christians often have a lot to say, a lot of zealous babble about God; A lot of babble to God; in case God might be asleep, or need reminding that we are here, that we, or someone else, is in anguish.

There is a silent tradition in the church. We've been little exposed to it in the Protestant Church; I suppose provoking Somerset Maugham to make his comment. You know what it's like to be in the presence of someone who can't stop babbling; who dominates the space. After a time you realise it's more about their uncertainty, than them having much that's worthwhile saying. I wonder sometimes about our religious babble. When someone is in a crisis of faith, or caught in a dark place, or facing an overwhelming sense of their limitation. IT feels easier to babble, than be silent in the uncertainty. Words need not be our first response. As Walter Brueggemann invites us to honesty in our praying:

We stammer about your identity,

Only to learn that it is our own unsettling

Before you that wants naming.

The Apophatic tradition of prayer in the church is one of silence; an emptying of the mind of words, and worries and ideas; and resting in the presence of God. Mother Theresa, when asked how she prayed, what she did when she prayed said: *I listen; and God listens too*. This Apophatic tradition resonates with traditions of silence in other faiths: especially with Buddhism. And it is alive in monastic practice. I was studying with a young Catholic sister a couple of years ago. She was a member of an order in Sydney and served as chaplain on a Sydney university campus. But she left her campus ministry to join a silent order in Italy. It seemed an audacious, utterly counter-cultural move. I felt a kind of "how dare you" as she told fellow students what she was going to

do. In a society which values busyness and in which our worth is measured by our achievements, the choice to retreat into silence seemed utterly courageous.

It's not easy to find silence in our busy city now – the 24 hour news cycle, so many forms of sound-making devices which provide a constant background soundtrack to our days; the busy sounds of the city, the incessant babble of talkback radio, trams, trucks, cars, planes, people plugged in wherever they are, PA announcements to punctuate our tram and train rides. Information! Information and more information!

Rod Horsfield spoke recently of the practising of discernment as people of faith – not just individually seeking to discern but collectively wondering about our shared path. Our desire to find ways forward are often dominated by an excess of words, brimming over with our competing opinions, egos jostling to prevail, zealous for the Lord, at least who we imagine the Lord to be and what the Lord wants.

The church of which we have been a part is coming to an end; it is collapsing all around us. All our certainties are gone. And it feels like we are left with the sound of sheer silence. Are we able to listen? And even if we are listening, can we hear?

Elijah is given the simple instruction to go to the wilderness of Damascus – go on your way. This is not the end.

We are called to faithfulness toward God. Our guide is Jesus who showed faithfulness toward a particular image of God; not a sword-wielding God; rather an image of God against which the sword was wielded by the religiously certain. It is not God who needs protecting or for us to carry out some kind of zealous crusade. We are called to quiet but confident faithfulness making the reign of God present and real for each other, for those whom we meet in our day to day lives, for an earth crumbling under our certainties. May God have mercy on us and grant us peace.

## Not at our beck and call

We call out your name in as many ways as we can.

We fix your role toward us in the ways we need.

We approach you from the particular angle of our life.

We do all that, not because you need to be identified,  
But because of our deep need,  
Our deep wound,  
Our deep hope.

And then, we are astonished that while our names for you

Serve for a moment,

You break beyond them in your freedom,

You show yourself yet fresh beyond our utterance,

You retreat into your splendour beyond our grasp.

We are – by your freedom and hiddenness –

Made sure yet again that you are God ...

Beyond us, for us, but beyond us,

Not at our beck and call,  
But always in your own way.  
We stammer about your identity,  
Only to learn that it is our own unsettling  
Before you that wants naming.

Beyond all our explaining and capturing and fixing you  
We give you praise ,  
We thank you for your fleshed presence in suffering love,  
And for the names that you give us.

Amen

Walter Brueggemann – *Awed to heaven rooted in earth*, Fortress Press, 2003