

# Still Small Voice

1 Kings 19

I love 1 Kings 19, the story of Elijah, it is one of the biggest surprises in the Old Testament.

What happens is that Elijah appears like Superman in 1 Kings 17

No other figure like him has appeared in the history of Israel

He sets a blue print for prophetic action which we will later discover echoes of in the life of John the Baptist and Jesus.

He stands up to the King, King Ahab - promising him no rain for three years,

Standing against him because Ahab has fallen for Baal the god of success, who can easily be bought.

He is part of incredible acts - being fed by Ravens in 1 Kings 17, having a miraculous jar of meal and a miraculous jug of oil with the widow and then restoring her son, and then getting into the great fire contest with the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18.

Now I want to talk about a conversation that Bob Davidson, the very Reverend Robert Davidson, who was moderator of the Church, and professor of Old Testament once told of coming out watching Cecil B Demille's The Ten Commandments - you know that great biblical epic of fire and seas being parted and the ten commandments on the mountain, and the plagues against Egypt.

And Bob Davidson was behind two women coming out the cinema and one turned to the other and said "Well that's what religion should be like"

And Bob Davidson's comment was "it was the most irreligious movie I have ever seen in my life" and then he went on to speak about the Palestinian refugee camps in the Sinai which were not far from the site of the film, and he didn't believe in a God of fire, but a God who was present with the poorest in those camps.

But that picture of Elijah up Mount Carmel and the fire coming down from the mountain - that is what some people think religion should be like.

And worryingly when Elijah then slaughters the 450 prophets of Baal, that is what people think religion should be like.

And then Ahab returns to his palace at the end of 1 Kings 18, and Elijah is able to run on ahead of his chariot, and once again - we think that is what religion should be like.

And perhaps if we pray enough, and perhaps if we are zealous enough then religion will become like that.

Now I do believe in commitment, and discipleship that costs.

But this is a fanaticism which I find difficult, and I find it difficult that the Bible seems to have no problem with this, and the slaughter of these prophets passes without comment - admittedly there is no direct approval, but the implication is that Elijah would not have got away with this had the fire not come down from heaven, so God seems to have provided the backing needed for this, and there comes no condemnation later on in the text - indeed the law is that if there is a false prophet then they are to be put to death, exactly as Elijah has done.

So you have this fiery prophetic Israel  
This superman type figure,  
And all the fire is being rained down  
And the sword brought down on the opponents of Yahweh.

And then Jezebel hears about it, and she is furious and she sends a messenger to Elijah,  
"May the gods do to me, and yet more so, if you are not killed by the sword today as you have killed one of the other prophets"

And then the most surprising verse...  
"And Elijah was afraid"

Something about Jezebel has punctured Elijah's seeming invincibility  
Or perhaps something disturbing about Elijah earlier - his egoism  
Or maybe his sense of perfection  
Or perhaps even the trauma of the violence that he has perpetrated... everybody talks about burn out here, but Elijah is not particularly hard worked, but he has been responsible for a huge act of violence.

He is afraid and he runs for his soul, and he makes Bathsheba - which is the place that the runaway Hagar ran to, and it is in Judah so he is away from the King  
And he goes a day's journey into the wilderness - people who study wilderness say that it takes about four days to shed civilisation - so he has still carrying a lot of the things

And then he he lies down under a broom tree, and an angel meets him, gives him hot cakes -  
Elijah has been fed with some miraculous food, and he eats and he lies down again,  
And this time the Angel must get him to go further, so he is given more food and water, and this time he moves forty days into the wilderness -

Forty days is the time it takes to become all of Israel  
The time it takes to inhabit the great desert journeys  
It is stripping down to his essence,  
And after 40 days he gets to Horeb which is also the mountain that Moses went to, it is the same  
mountain as Sinai,  
And this time he meets God,

So having undergone the most Israel-y of experiences - 40 days in wilderness  
He comes to the mountain which is the very icon of Israelite identity - the mountain of the  
commandments  
He comes to the cave on that mountain, where Moses the great hero saw God

And God asks him a question...

"What are you doing here Elijah?"

What kind of way is this asked,  
Is it with accusation?  
Is it with kindness?  
Is it the kind of question that is going to force Elijah to deal with who he has become - the  
powerful egoist, who has been pierced with great fear.

And Elijah has an answer, it reads like a prepared speech...

"I have been exceedingly zealous for the Lord God of hosts..."  
So this is an answer that it is true,  
It is not the reason he is here,  
But he has been zealous  
But also the first thing he seeks to say, paints him as the great hero.

And will Elijah be able to let go of that image,  
To probe at anything else.

"For the Israelites have forsaken your covenant - that is kind of true, but we don't know that all of  
them  
And they have thrown down your altars - we don't know about this, and there should only be one  
altar in Jerusalem, possibly

And killed your prophets with the sword - the only person that has been killing prophets with a sword in the story has been Elijah himself - this is curious, blaming the Baalists for the violence which he himself has perpetrated

And I, only I, am left - which is also very strange because it is the Baalists which have been reduced, and Elijah has been told that at least 100 prophets of Yahweh have been hidden in a cave.

It is a story of I have behaved perfectly, but everyone else has been terrible  
And I, only I am left.

It is an odd tale.

But God does not contradict it,

Instead God puts on a display, he passes by - now this is the same verb - the passing of the Lord, that Moses had in the same cave, the passing by of God's glory

But this time it is a different experience, it is not a repetition of Israel's past, but God is showing himself in a new way, to a different person,

And God says I will pass by

And there is a great wind, just as there was a great wind that blew in the clouds that ended the drought in Chapter 18.

And the wind is huge, and it is breaking mountains

And it is splitting rocks,

This is an enormous wind

Before The Lord

But But But

God is not in the wind

This is the only time in the scriptures that I can think of God not being in something

And it is not in the most God like thing you would expect

This huge wind, breaking mountains.

And this is the very essence of God,

This the Ten Commandments with Cecil B Demille

But God is **not** in the wind.

And then there is an earthquake

And this time we are alert to the pattern

And God is not in the earthquake

But now there is fire,

And perhaps because this is the third time

Because in the third time at the story you are meant to tell something different

And there is fire, and we know about fire because God was in the fire on Mount Carmel  
But no, God **not** in the fire  
Not in the fire  
What is God doing  
What is God changing

And up to this moment Elijah has been the prophet who has been like a wind, like an earthquake,  
and he has called down fire  
But God is not here

And then comes the still small voice  
The voice of sheer silence  
And at this point  
Elijah wraps his mantle around him  
He cannot bear the silence.

Isn't that interesting - he could cope with the wind, the fire, the earthquake  
But as soon as God comes in silence,  
Elijah needs to protect himself.

Pascal once said that the problem with the world, is that people cannot bear to be by themselves  
in silence.  
But this is where God appears to be

In the silence  
In the stripping away

And then God speaks, and this time the question  
In the experience that has broken down every previous understanding that Elijah has had  
And he asks the same question

"What are you doing here?"

And this time we expect a change, because Elijah has met with God  
But the same self-serving everyone-else blaming story is uttered  
"I have been very very zealous for the Lord of hosts  
But the sons of Israel have forsaken your covenant  
torn down your altars,  
And killed your prophets with the sword  
And I alone am left"

And he is not changed  
At least on the outside he is not changed,  
Because that is the work of silence, very often on the outside it feels like very little has happened.

It is such a striking story,  
Because it deconstructs every image of God  
And Elijah cannot bear it,  
But for the moment at least he cannot change.

This is about us being stuck in the story  
When God is not.

And then Elijah is given a job  
Go to Damascus and anoint Hazael King  
And anoint Jehu king of Israel  
And anoint Elisha as prophet in your place

How did Elijah deal with this  
He goes past Elisha  
Who is the model of devotion  
Sacrificing the bulls, getting rid of the commitment, burning the bridges to his former life  
But Elijah does not anoint him  
He throws over the mantle.

And the other two - Jehu and Hazel - God does not do these things.

And then the story morphs into the Elisha story,  
As if it is moving on.

Elisha asks to go and say goodbye to his father and mother  
And kiss them,  
And then he will follow  
And Elijah seems to grumpily say  
Go back again for what have I done to you

So Elisha sets out  
And doing so he seems to have brought together a number of elements of the story  
He has kissed his mother and father, just as the prophets have not kissed Baal  
Elijah has passed by

And thrown his mantle - just as God passed by him  
Elisha runs after the oxen, just as Elijah ran ahead of Ahab  
And the people are eating just as Elijah ate

There is something here about this scene, that brings together all the pain of the past in a  
strange way  
And gives it the possibility of a better future

Despite Elijah's brittleness, and his pain, and his incomprehension that he who has come so close  
Cannot make the world in his image

This is a strange story about God meeting us in silence  
And doing a new thing, even if we do not notice it, even if we refuse it

And giving us a future that we did not expect  
And changing us  
And giving us company.

I think what happens on the mountain is that Elijah experiences a new dimension of God which  
undoes all the old dimensions.

And he strips him of his sense of uniqueness  
And gives him company.

Instead of Elijah saying "I am unique"  
God says "You are not alone"

And now go.

And this is the God we meet in silence,  
Stillness  
Changing us  
Sending us into the place where we shall go.

Not unique  
In company  
No alone  
With God  
Still with God  
The still God

The God of the Still small voice.

AMEN