



Sermon preached by The Revd. Dr Robert Mackley, Vicar of St Mary the Less, Cambridge on Sunday 9 August 2020

1 Kings 19:9-18; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

‘And God was not in the earthquake, the wind or the fire.’

When I was an undergraduate here in Cambridge I had a great worry about my faith: why didn’t God seem to speak to me?

Everyone else seemed to have great religious experiences. They would come back from one of the big charismatic churches on a Sunday night and recount people who’d been speaking in tongues and ‘slain in the Spirit’. Others would return from one of the big evangelical churches and say how during an evangelistic address they’d felt Jesus enter their hearts.

And these reports – which of course at the time I would greet with a smile and say ‘great, yes, that’s wonderful’ – would leave me feeling rather depressed. Did it mean my faith wasn’t real? Perhaps God didn’t like me? Why didn’t I have any great feelings like these? What was I doing wrong?

Well, of course, I discovered I wasn’t alone in all this. Lots of us don’t have these great religious experiences. The problem is that we associate God with the out of the ordinary. We imagine him to be ‘out there’ or ‘up there’, a God who is without, zapping and commanding in a big booming voice.

And we do that because at heart we make the mistake of thinking that God is – basically – a very, very big thing; another object in the universe, albeit one infinitely larger. God is not an object, however, not a thing. God is other; indeed he is so utterly other, so completely beyond our comprehension, that in fact he can draw exceptionally close: it is his very transcendence that makes his immanence possible to use theological terms. But in drawing close we miss him, rather like someone who’s been stood next to us for so long that we’ve forgotten they’re there. For God is – as St Augustine of Hippo put it – nearer to me than I am to myself.

We spend so long looking outside ourselves, waiting for some great crash of thunder, and when it doesn’t come we imagine that either God doesn’t exist or that he’s not interested in me. Whereas in fact God is within, absolutely close, the very source of our life and breathing, nurturing us and sustaining our existence every moment of our being.

And all of this is brought out wonderfully in the nineteenth chapter of the first Book of Kings from which we heard this morning. Elijah the prophet is depressed. Things are going badly and he thinks he’s a spiritual failure: ‘it’s enough,’ he says, ‘take away my life, I’m no better than my

ancestors'. But then he is told to hide in a cave on the mountain because God is about to pass by. And there was wind, and earthquake and fire, and as the reading says clearly, again and again – 'the Lord was not in the wind, the Lord was not in the earthquake, the Lord was not in the fire'. So where, then, does Elijah find God?

After the fire, there is 'the sound of sheer silence', what older translations and some hymns describe as the 'still small voice'. And it is only then, after all the excitements and fireworks are past, that Elijah covers himself in his mantle (his cloak) and makes a tentative step to the entrance of the cave. It's from the silence that Elijah hears a voice. There is plenty of banging and crashing, but these reveal nothing. Elijah knows this: he stays in the cave, his cloak dangling round his neck, and he waits.

And of course Elijah isn't just any old chap. He's the greatest of the great prophets. He is 'jealous' for the Lord, holding out even when all the other prophets have been killed and the altars and the covenant destroyed. This jealous servant of the Lord, one who has known a fair amount of earthquake, wind and fire in his career, who is no stranger to religious pyrotechnics – it is this man who knows that he is going to find God in the sound of sheer silence; in the still, small voice.

For those of us who feel rather second rate that we've not had some great performance from God in our lives, who feel that we might be spiritual failures, therefore, Elijah is a fantastic comfort. For he reminds us not only that encounter with God often comes out of apparent failure and depression, but even more he points us to the silence and the quiet as the places for meeting the divine.

But he does even more than that – because notice that as he goes out to meet God, he edges to the entrance to the cave and then he covers himself with his cloak. He's not staring out and about to find God, waiting for some great appearance in the sky. If God did appear in the sky, Elijah would miss him anyway, because his face is covered by his mantle. And, what's more, the text says – 'then there came a voice to him' – not 'a voice boomed out', indeed it's not even made explicit that it's God's voice: 'a voice came to him'. Notice the subtlety, the understatement.

But even more than that, notice what happens next. Elijah is not given some great display of divine power. He is asked simply to tell his story, how he came to be in this place and then he's given a job to do. This 'religious experience' – and it doesn't even begin to border on American tele-evangelist stuff does it? – this encounter with God is not given to make Elijah feel warm inside. It's given for a practical purpose. There are things that need doing – there are new kings and a prophet to anoint.

For God is terribly practical; and of course, for us as Christians how could we think of him in any other way? For the Incarnation is immensely practical – it is God taking ordinary flesh and living a human life, with its round of eating and drinking, and meetings and events. The incidence of what we would misguidedly call 'religious experience' in the gospels is very small even at that ultimate religious experience, the Resurrection, it should not be forgotten that Mary Magdalene mistakes Jesus for the gardener...

Now of course, the out of the ordinary does happen to people, great miracles do occur, it should not be denied. Generally speaking, however, it seems to happen to those to whom God can't get through any other way. It's frequently God's last resort; because, actually, it is 'out of the ordinary' for God too – for an incarnated God, for Jesus Christ, it is the fleshly and human and

humdrum that are the channels of grace, of divine presence – a touch of the hand, a splash of water, a piece of bread, a sip of wine, some oil. A shared meal the night before death, a meeting in a garden early in the morning. So God is within, as much as without; closer to me than I am to myself.

So let us follow God's words to Elijah: 'go into the wilderness'. And that wilderness is in fact our everyday lives, especially at the moment as we deal with Covid 19 and as you deal with the upheaval of merging churches. And in the wilderness of the ordinary, let us, with Elijah, attend to the silence. To our neighbours. To the mystery within ourselves. Let us use this strange time for the Lord. And if we do, we also can be confident that we will hear the quiet divine voice, and we might find that God may just have a job for us to do too.