

Sermon

Peace

23.6.19

1 Kings 19: 1-15a

Gal 3: 23- end

Luke 8: 26-39

May I speak in the name of the living God who I Father, Son and Holy Spirit - Amen

What in the world it is to know despair. Despair goes beyond disappointment or sadness; it is the crushing, sapping sense of loss, of all hope gone, of impotence around others, of being entirely adrift with no influence, no way back, no nothing.

Our human condition, rich in its capacity for joy, happiness, exhilaration and quiet contentment also knows the long dark nights of the soul that make us want, like Elijah in the OT reading, to crawl away, curl up and wish for no more.

We know despair in grief, in relationships, in acute stress, through frustration at what seem to be plain wrongs that seem unassailable, through criticism and accusation, through simply being in the world around us: we might perhaps despair at the current state of our log-jammed, intractable political life, and despair for its immediate future.

Elijah knows despair. Elijah has challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest. Elijah has defeated the priests of Baal and killed them in the aftermath; but Jezebel - a worshipper of Baal, who by marriage to Ahab has become Queen of Judah, has vowed revenge on Elijah, and ordered his death. So Elijah flees and in despair sits under a solitary broom tree - and asks of God that he might die.

Here, after such a triumph of God over the false prophets of Baal, for all that, Elijah is a dead man, a price on his head. He asks to die.

He falls asleep in his despair. He is awoken by an angel, who gently entreats him to eat and drink, who makes for him a cake baked on hot stones. He is encouraged to eat because otherwise, as the angel gently says, the journey will be too much for him. God comes to him in the night, and bids him to stand at the mouth of the cave in which he is sheltering - and so comes the wind, and the earthquake and the fire, and in none of which is God; but then comes the sound of sheer silence - and from the silence the voice of God who directs him to return to Damascus, and assures him of a future where Elijah will anoint the next king of Israel.

What a picture of despair, and an early picture of pastoral care, and of the voice of God that speaks after the storm and the rage, in that small still voice of calm. It is

the voice that has not forgotten him, the voice that has sent an angel to minister to him, that challenges him to get up, and assures him of his safe passage and continued, purposeful life.

In our Gospel reading Jesus encounters a man beset by demons - a man tormented by many voices - perhaps today we might recognise this more as someone who is unwell. And in a curious dialogue with the demons, Jesus allows them to enter the pigs, who then rush to oblivion. The man is healed - the fret dispersed - and he is sitting at Jesus feet - calm, at peace, and he obeys Jesus' instruction to go home, and say what Jesus has done.

In both our Old Testament and our Gospel reading there is divine intervention. Elijah is ministered to by an angel and is shown in the peace of God - the silence of God - the presence and reassurance of God. Curiously, in the case of the man and the demons, it is the demons who beg to leave. Do we then have a sense of understanding, that we can ask God for our demons to be gone from us?

All may seem easier said than done. But what makes the difference is the intervention: God comes, God ministers; Christ comes, Christ ministers; Elijah listens; the demons ask; Elijah obeys, the man obeys. Peace to both, peace to all.

The hurt had hurt, the pain was real, the despair acute - but there is healing. Into despair comes the intervention. Into despair comes the healing difference.

Some years ago now, something went badly wrong for me in the course of my work. A case I was doing effectively exploded in my face. My own position was called into question, I was severely criticised for something that was not my fault, and my integrity was questioned. I was alone, beleaguered and under attack. There was nothing I could do. There was no clock to turn back. It could not be fixed. It became intensely personal on a very unpleasant level. I wanted to give up, run away, to lie down under my own broom tree, and ask for it all to be over, to be released, to give up.

Here at St Johns on the first Sunday after it had all gone wrong I felt such despair. But what kept me going, along with support from my family and my friends, was you - the congregation of St John the Evangelist, Hills Road, Cambridge. You did not know it. I did not tell anyone, or hardly anyone. I did not tell Sue our Vicar. But every week, being part of this congregation, being in song and prayer, in the Eucharist, in the silence, being in the sheer normality of being with Christian people who I knew loved me in the fellowship of Christ, I got through. Each week I was reminded of something bigger and better and more profound than any squabble in a court room in London. I was able to sustain civility in the face of hostility; I could turn the other cheek; I resisted the temptation to pay back like for like (and oh, how I wanted to); I prayed on the Circle Line every morning between Kings Cross and Great Portland Street. After many weeks, months even, the case ended, and I had won - not the case - but I had come through, my civility and my values - Christian values - our values - won out over the pettiness. We were back on speaking terms, I was back to a professional normal.

I could not have done it without **you**. You did not know, but **you** were the cakes on hot stones, **you** were the drink, the encouragement; and God was in the sheer silence, after the earthquakes and the wind and the fire - God was in the silence - in the peace that is in the silence. And without this Church the journey through that case might have been too much for me, as the Old Testament puts it.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians we are told that we are free. We are free from being guarded under the law. Now we are called by Faith to be children of God: all the peoples of the world. There is no longer Greek, Jew, slave, free, male and female - we are all children of God in Christ. We are family.

We are family.

We are in family and fellowship in the good times and the bad. We unite in grief, we unite in anxiety in illness, loss, stress, in anxieties however great or small. We are all the same, one and all, united in faith. We are family in a handshake, a smile, simply sitting next to each other, simply because we come. We may have our differences, we may despair at times - but we are family - whether it is your first visit today or your thousandth.

Because what we do is love: we have loved, we love and we shall love again. We live God's love through us, in us and around us.

So we look around the world and yes, we may despair - not in that crushing despair of profound personal loss - but we wonder at the world and there can be despair of a kind. We don't understand why there is such Geo-political conflict; we don't understand the excesses of the United States administration and why it defines itself by who it is against; we see judicial murder, we see obscene wealth, we see complacency, corruption, mendacity and exploitation; we don't understand why the planet so precious is being allowed to slip into crisis, and those that could do something about it seem unheeding, or under-whelmingly uncommitted at best.

Such earthquakes, such winds, such fire. Our answer is always to remember that above the temporal earthquakes and fires, we are called to live in the Kingdom of God, here on earth. We do that by living out our values in love and Christian fellowship as, on a tiny personal level once you did for me.

If we lift our eyes beyond the roar of all that feels so wrong, and seek God in the silence that is always there as God seeks us, we can know God, can hold dear and fast to all that is good and true in Faith, in love and in each other as God's people here on earth. And we can vanquish despair and pick ourselves up and carry on with purpose. We may not have Kings to anoint, but we have business to be about.

Rowan Williams writes: "the goal of our decision making is to show what God's selfless attention might mean in prosaic terms of everyday life". We are, observes Williams, to "examine any proposed action in terms of how does it manifest the selfless holiness of God and how does it serve as a gift to build up community".

This is living the way of the Cross, that through grace new life is offered to the community "living in love" in today's world. We live in love as community.

The Kingdom can come - the Kingdom is come - it feels bashed and besieged and we feel it is beleaguered at times, but nothing will shake it, no wind, no fire or earthquake; nothing separates us from the love of God. We only need to listen in, or despite, or through our despair.

And when we listen, and we look around in the peace that lies behind the storms, we find the love of God here, in this place in each other, a love that never dies, a love that has conquered death, a love that is for ever and ever - *Amen*.

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