

A Sermon Preached at the Eucharist

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1 Kings 19:1-4, 8-15a

For all that attentiveness seems the most desirable state for the spiritual life, for many of us we come to the crucial moments in our spiritual journey in a state of weariness. 'What is weariness? It is the touch of death!' proclaimed the Congregationalist preacher George Campbell Morgan.

But weariness is both a weakness and a door of grace. The theology of God's engagement with our weariness is seen most vividly in the experience of the prophet Elijah as it is recorded in chapter nineteen of the First Book of Kings. God actively engages with Elijah's weariness of body and spirit; he provides practical and emotional support and changes the way in which Elijah approaches his calling as a prophet.

Chapter eighteen of the First Book of Kings shows Elijah at the height of his power as a prophet. Under the influence of Queen Jezebel the people of Israel have turned to the worship of the Canaanite deity, Baal. In a confrontation on top of Mount Carmel the priests of Baal have tried to invoke the power of their god to set fire to a sacrifice placed on the altar. After a day of singing, praying and dancing around the altar, taunted from the sidelines by Elijah, they give up.

Elijah steps forward, orders the altar and its surrounds to be drenched with water and then prays to God for a sign which comes in the form of a flash of flame which consumes the sacrifice, the altar itself and the priests of Baal standing nearby. The rest of the priests Elijah puts to the sword. The chapter ends with him sitting by the smoking remains of the altar, amid the dead bodies of the pagan priests and with the rain that drought-stricken Israel has prayed for appearing on the horizon.

After this triumph and its sense of being in the midst of the power of God, Elijah suddenly comes up against the harsh reality of Jezebel's vengeful fury. And he panics. And he runs. And as he runs to the very margins of the land he leaves behind his servant and comes alone into the wilderness.

The sense of his desolation is conveyed in the words of this morning's Psalm:

My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
'Where is your God?'

And later in the same psalm:

I say to God, my rock,
'Why have you forgotten me?'

Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?
As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
'Where is your God?'

His solitude becomes the theatre in which he now finds himself; his grip on his role and on God is broken. His achievements seem as nothing: 'I am no better than my ancestors'. In this state all he can think of is to die.

Instead he does what so many of us do, perhaps rather guiltily, in such situations, he falls asleep. This sleep is not a sign of Elijah's lethargy, rather it is the sleep of exhaustion and allows for the first step in God's care for him – God sends him sleep. God's gift of rest acknowledges Elijah's bodily needs.

Next God begins to address Elijah's isolation. This takes place in the verses that are omitted from this morning's reading. This is a multi-faceted process of engagement that develops throughout the passage. First it is an angel that comes to him. Through the angel God meets Elijah's need for basic sustenance. Once again Elijah's bodily needs are acknowledged. And once again Elijah falls asleep; however this time it is a more restful and refreshing sleep.

The angel wakes Elijah a second time and presses more food on him, along with the suggestion that he will need to eat 'otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' Elijah receives the care that is offered and as a result the man who lay down 'under a solitary broom tree' gets up and 'went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God'. God, knowing the limit of our strength, gives us resources for his work.

In this next stage of his retreat Elijah comes to a sacred place. Mount Horeb is the holy mountain of Exodus. It is referred to as "the mountain of God" in Exodus 3:1. Even here God shows concern for Elijah's well-being. The cave in which he spends the night could be seen as a place of hiding in contrast with Elijah's call as a prophet to proclaim God's judgement openly. However at a mundane level we simply need to contrast the cave with the 'solitary broom tree' under which he had collapsed earlier. The cave is a shelter, the next stage in the basic provision of rest, food and shelter by which God exercises pastoral care for his prophet.

Now God speaks directly to Elijah. It is only possible for hard questions to be asked when basic needs have been met and when Elijah is in an appropriate place. With those needs met Elijah is able to communicate with God and tell him how things look from his perspective. Once this dialogue has been made possible restitution can begin to take place. With the memory of his triumph on Mount Carmel collapsed in ruins, Elijah now learns that God is not to be found in the spectacular. It is the 'still, small voice' that brings Elijah to the mouth of the cave.

God continues his gentle shepherding of Elijah by responding to his remaining need – the need for companionship. God promises Elijah the support of others, including those in authority, and an apprentice who will carry on Elijah's work. Elijah's situation has not changed but he is aware that he faces Jezebel with the support of the seven thousand

faithful along with new kings in Aram and Israel. Above all he has the support of Elisha whom he commissions at the end of the passage.

Elijah's experience will make him a better mentor for Elisha and an even greater prophet. His experiences have included the despair of abandonment as well as the triumph of the vindicating power of God. Perhaps most crucially his experience has included the painstaking, practical support of God.

We ourselves as we deal with our own weariness and despair need to remember the lesson which this passage teaches us – that God is a God who rests and refreshes those whom he calls and who acknowledges our needs at their most basic as well as at their most elevated.