

Sunday 11 February 2024, Sunday next before Lent, Choral Matins

1 Kings 19.1-19

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I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.

It's easy to feel alone. By nature, we are myopic, navel-gazing creatures. Our feelings are immediate, our reasonable faculties easily befuddled. We act and react on impulse and even when we try to justify our reactions as rational, others often do not experience them as such. The prophet Elijah was no different. In our first reading he acts on impulse, is driven by his emotions, and fails to react rationally in a time of stress. A most relatable character. We encounter him midway through a very serious conflict with Jezebel and her rather spineless husband Ahab, the seventh King of Israel. Jezebel herself was a princess of Sidon, modern-day Lebanon. Her name, interestingly, means 'Where is the Lord?'

Jezebel was a religious zealot intent on purging from her husband's kingdom all worship of the God of Israel and instituting the cult of Baal and Asherah. She systematically murdered the prophets of the Lord and had the altars of God torn down. When we encounter Elijah he has just come from an epic showdown with 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel.

In what was one of my favourite passages in childhood- and it remains so today- Elijah stood alone against the 450 and challenged them to call on their god to accept burnt offerings, without the provision of fire. All day long they called on Baal, but to no avail. Eventually, after much amused name-calling and provocation on Elijah's part, he steps forward, has the offerings soaked in water, and prays only once. Instantly, fire from heaven comes and consumes the water-soaked offerings, and Elijah leads the assembled people in slaughtering the false prophets.

Jezebel, you may imagine, is not pleased and vows to destroy Elijah. So he runs away. The one whose name means 'My God is the Lord', who has just witnessed the power of his God, who has just triumphed over 450 prophets of Baal and turned the hearts of many people back to the Lord flees for his life because a pagan princess is peeved at him.

How often do we react as though we do not know the power of the Lord? How often do we retire from the battlefield of life, assuming we have lost? *It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.* Elijah, Elijah! It was never about you. Though God's instrument, it was his power that poured forth fire from heaven. It was his glory that turned the hearts of the people back to true worship. You were the soldier, but the battle was the Lord's. But God is patient with Elijah; he lets him journey on a little longer in his doubt, even feeding him along the way. That is how God is with us. He feeds us even when we

forget him. He brings us- you- here to worship and with his word and prayer builds up the fainting spirit.

Food in the wilderness- and from thence to the mountain of God! Horeb, or Sinai, where Moses met with God and the earth shook and lightning flashed. For Elijah, however, God is not in the earthquake, nor in powerful buffeting wind, nor in devouring fire. *And after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?*

What doest thou here? I am running away, Lord. I am alone, Lord. I am embattled, Lord. There is no one else but me, Lord, and you know how I have tried. The Lord does not respond to Elijah's complaint. I find this notable. Having revealed his power by confounding the prophets of Baal, feeding Elijah with miraculous food, and revealing his control over the elemental forces of nature, the Lord perhaps feels he has proved himself enough.

Sometimes we question God's ability to help us, to save or defend. Often we focus on our reaction and our emotional state. We regularly- and I do this, so I know how easy it is- we regularly gaze inward and focus our attention on ourselves and fail to see what God has done and is doing around us. Elijah, 'My God is the Lord', I have not lost my strength. *Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.* You are not alone. You do not need to run away. Despair is both unworthy of you and unworthy of my glorious power. The wayward king and his waspish wife are already withered on the vine. They are nothing to me, and should be less than nothing to you.

Jezebel, whose name is 'Where is the Lord?' will find out soon enough that I am not absent from my people. I have not overlooked her slaughter of my prophets and the throwing down of my altars. Now is the beginning of her end. *Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus: and when thou comest, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria: And Jehu the son of Nimshi shalt thou anoint to be king over Israel: and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room. And it shall come to pass, that him that escapeth the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay: and him that escapeth from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay.*

When we feel that God has left us or that he has forgotten his Church, our need is to look out and up. Look away from yourself to the God who has done great things for you already. Remove your nose from your navel- it is so easy to double over in spirit when confronted with the ills of the world- but stretch up and out again. The Lord is about to triumph. The wicked will be done away, the righteous will rejoice, the kingdom will be restored. Look! It is already happening. And you are not alone. Amen.