

When I read Elijah's story for today amazement, weirdness, bizarre, unusual, unexpected would be words that come to mind. This story demonstrates, for me, one of those puzzles in which we have to find 10 faults about it. What is wrong with the picture? In the puzzle something may be upside down, inside out, not where it should, where it shouldn't be!

Delving further into Elijah's story I find myself asking questions. He is certainly depressed. "Its too much Lord," he prayed, "Take away my life I might as well be dead." Suicidal comes to mind. He wished he was dead. This prophet whose ministry had been conducted in a torment of energy forever wrestling against the odds - be it the fickleness of King Ahab, the cunning of Queen Jezebel or the religious unbelief of the most of the people - now feels finished. Nothing more can be said or done.

To make matters worse, Queen Jezebel was out to take her revenge. She lost no time in sending a message to Elijah saying that she was going to do to him what he did to these prophets of Baal. And as we heard last week they were all killed after Elijah's staging of God's epic battle on the top of the mountain. Elijah fled and travelled the length of Israel with his servant. And leaving him he walked a long, long way into the desert. We catch up with him, coming, so exhausted, to sit under a tree. Sitting there he thinks suicidal thoughts. If anyone is in a chronically depressed state he is.

But why? This is one of those parts of the story which is a bit difficult to understand, one which doesn't seem quite right. Why is Elijah so intimidated by Jezebel? After all he had just won a tremendous victory over the prophets of Baal, in front of so many people including King Ahab himself? Why had he, so quickly, become a depressive wreck after that emotionally charged event on top of the mountain? Was it because he feared for his life? He said he might as well be dead. Was it that he felt alone? He was the only prophet of the Lord left now. Was it that he had psyched himself up so much for that battle, that now, with Ahab and Jezebel still not giving in, he had burnt himself out. Was this threat by Jezebel really the last straw that will, literally break Elijah's life. Maybe! It just seems difficult to believe that, with God so much in evidence on Elijah's behalf, how all this happens so quickly and extremely when Elijah was literally 'on top of the world.'

When you read this passage again which I hope you will, consider how YOU would respond to some of the events of the story so far:

receiving a death threat
feeling suicidal
making a long journey on foot.
encountering an angel

Ah yes, depressed and suicidal Elijah encounters an angel who gives him food and drink, then leaves him to sleep, and comes back to give him more food, enough for another journey, on foot, for forty days, to Mount Horeb. Simple really. Here comes an angel in his hour of desperate need who feeds Elijah, comforts him, supports him in his rest, talks to him and tells him where to go. Is this what angels do? Is this what you would expect an angel to do? Does this make an encounter with an angel

meaningful to you? Poor Elijah. He must have thought: why do I go there? Why now? Why me? I cannot go on? Why should I? Why indeed?

The story gets more amazing now and even more unexpected. More things go wrong with our picture. Elijah gets to the mountain and sits in a cave to rest. God says: “Elijah what are you doing here?”

Why did God speak to him? Surely he knew what he was doing here! Surely he knew what deep anguish poor Elijah was going through! Surely he knew he was running for his life away from revengeful Jezebel! Surely he knew how suicidal he felt! Surely he knew that Elijah felt his life finished!

So was it because the Lord wanted Elijah to talk to HIM directly? Was it that the Lord thought it would help Elijah to talk through his problems? Or was it that the Lord wanted Elijah outside the cave to witness something monumental?

And something monumental did happen. We find ourselves staring at a wild ferocious aspect of nature. Precipitous rock faces, jagged and broken here and there, a dark mysterious cave, a wind rising, tearing, a terrifying precursor of a violent storm; and thunder reverberating around the mountain, flashing them into vivid brightness every now and again with blue-forked lightning reaching down to splinter the rocks and hurtle them into the ravine below. The place was then shaken by an earthquake. And high up on an all but inaccessible ledge, you see this gaunt, exhausted figure struggling to stand against the fierceness of the elements, his face wrapped in a cloak. To Elijah, this must have really seemed the end. Here, in this amazing picture, is the Lord acting to end it all for him and to symbolise true victory over the wayward people. Death hadn't come under the juniper tree, as much as he had wished it, but it is going to come here. Here on Mount Horeb the Lord is speaking to him, in the earth-shattering scene that exactly mirrors his shattered life.

But no! Again this is all wrong. The Lord did not respond in the rock-shattering wind, earthquake and the fire. Back in the cave the Lord, in the stillness, in what the Good News calls a soft whisper, says to Elijah again: What are you doing here? It is all so amazing that God, who had produced the battle scene against the prophets of Baal, and controlled this earth shattering storm, spoke to Elijah in the silence of the cave saying; why are you here? All unexpected and seemingly wrong.

Back in the cave, in a moment of breathtaking silence between the crashes of thunder, he heard, as it were, a ‘still small voice’ calling to his inner being. Surely it was natural for a man of Elijah’s status to recognise God’s presence, his action and voice in the cataclysms of human history and the terrorising upheavals of his environment. God, blowing his trumpets loud, so to speak, to get his people to heed his commandments. Yes I think it was. I believe Elijah believed God would speak through these raging elements and bring vengeance and victory over evil. He thought his own time was up. He had done all he could. He had failed. Jezebel was after him. Nothing had changed. God had finished with him. He had certainly finished with himself. This was God speaking through this awful situation.

But it wasn't. That was all wrong. Elijah was told, in a stillness, not to expect to see smashing victories in God’s service casting away the wickedness of the world. Elijah

had dreamed of being in the thick of this himself. But this was not how God necessarily works. God works slowly and patiently and in quiet ways drawing on people with the constraints of his love, not with the fury of his anger. Poor Elijah. His work had not finished. He had just a little bit of admin work to do. He had to go to Damascus, anoint Hazael as King of Syria and Elisha as his successor. How dull was that? How unheroic and ordinary?

Once we walk away from our story of Elijah today and try to make sense of its unexpected turns and amazing images, there is a great deal for us today. We have seen a dejected, depressed, lonely, isolated, suicidal, beaten man, running for his life, wanted by a revengeful, glory seeking Queen, travel the length of Israel by foot, and then more, ending up exhausted and hungry under a tree, desperately wanting to die. It is difficult to see why he is in such a state but we empathise with him. But God has other plans. An angel feeds, supports and cares for him, sympathising with him and telling him to go to Mount Horeb. Forty days more walking! Elijah goes, he tries to stay in the security of a cave but God says, “No, get out there and witness my power.” He does and sees it as a sign of God’s ultimate victory and his final demise. But no, God doesn’t communicate in the power of the storm, he waits for the silence of the cave and whispers to Elijah, that he isn’t finished with Elijah. “Get over this helplessness and hopelessness and seek my service wherever it leads.” Elijah goes and does just that.

An interesting story with many unexpected twists. We don’t have to be mystics to meet God in the things he has made or in ourselves. Everywhere we go, everything that we do God is there waving flags, semaphoring, jumping up and down, and waving his arms, trying, often in vain, to get our attention. Too often we are not expecting to see him and become too blind to see him. So often he IS in the stillness. It is a soft whisper from God that should set our hearts and minds racing, in anticipation of being part of his work, in anticipation of sharing his love. And as Elijah so spectacularly experienced, it is in the stillness, in staying quiet, where our own strength lies.

God knows our needs for purpose and our physical and emotional needs. He is eager to meet those needs. Perhaps God is inviting us to let him meet needs we have never even thought about laying before him. But, above and beyond all this, from these events comes the assurance that whatever danger, battle, problem, situation, however serious, is happening to us, with us, around us, at this moment or is going to happen in the future, God will be there to help us through it; we are safe in God’s hands.