

Sermon - divine solitude

Based on 1 Kings 19.9-16 and Matthew 14.22-36

Elijah and Jesus: similar contexts for today's stories

- There are some interesting points of connection between today's two stories - between the prophet Elijah engaging with God while hiding in a cave, and the context that leads to Jesus walking on the water.
- I'm going to start by reminding you of what has taken place before today's Gospel passage, and then do the same for the Old Testament story.
- At the beginning of this chapter from Matthew, we are told of John the Baptist's beheading by Herod, and his disciples then go to warn Jesus.
- As we heard last week, Jesus responds to this warning and goes away to be by himself: he crosses the lake, only to be met by a crowd who were in need of God's blessing.
- The crowd stays with him so long that they need food, and so through divine provenance over five thousand people are fed.
- Once the crowds have been dismissed, Jesus goes up the mountain by himself to pray.
- I will explore the rest of the Gospel story later, but it is important to note that what happens in the rest of today's Gospel story is - I think - as a direct result of Jesus spending time quietly, intentionally, with God.
- So I'm now going to look at the Old Testament story, from chapter 19 in the first book of Kings.
- At the beginning of that chapter Elijah is warned that Queen Jezebel is out to kill him.
- So he goes off to the wilderness and feels miserable and sorry for himself.
- He is hungry and has no food, and lies down to sleep.
- An angel wakes him up and he finds a cake baking on hot stones and a jar of water.
- He eats and drinks, falls asleep, and then the same thing happens again.
- While there might not be another five thousand people with him, this is still recognised as an instance of divine providence, sustaining him with food.
- From there he sets out, and after a journey, just as Jesus did, Elijah goes up a mountain - Mount Horeb - and spends the night there.

Elijah meets with God in the silence

- Now we aren't told of the conversation that Jesus has with God: instead we are given some descriptions of what happens around Jesus afterwards.
- But we are given a description of the encounter Elijah has with God, and this is very helpful, because it could have been quite similar to what Jesus experienced up the mountain himself.
- Elijah is invited to talk to God, and to state what's bothering him.
- He explains that he's been trying to encourage people to turn to God, because they have forsaken their faith relationship with God, and indeed have been killing the prophets.
- Jesus could have said the same thing, and referred to the killing of his prophet cousin, John the Baptist.
- Elijah continues that he feels quite alone, and that his own life is threatened.
- The Lord tells him to stand outside the cave in order to have a direct encounter with the Lord.
- Then there is the well-known description of a mighty wind, followed by an earthquake, followed by a bushfire - with the expectation that the Lord might somehow use these awesome physical events to make his presence known.
- But Elijah realises that the Lord is not engaging with him through these events, and waits.
- And then there is the sound of sheer silence.
- It is absolutely quiet.

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- The Lord becomes most present with the absence of everything else.

God tells Elijah to get busy

- So Elijah covers his face, and - aware that he is fully in the presence of God Almighty - restates his situation:
 - his passion for God's righteousness,
 - his lament over the selfish and destructive actions of his people, and
 - the fear he has for his own life.
- And he hears the Lord speak into his situation.
- And when we look at the words that Elijah registers, it's as though his own concerns are seemingly ignored.
- He isn't thanked for being passionate, he isn't comforted in his lament, he isn't reassured about his life.
- It's as though the Lord has heard Elijah, and responded: 'Okay - so this is what you need to do about the situation you're in ...,' and then tells him to appoint some new leaders for the Israelites and the neighbouring Arameans, and a successor prophet for himself.
- And what is Elijah's response to the Lord?
- Well he doesn't ask: But what about my needs? - because he knows that the Lord has heard him.
- Instead it is because:
 - he has been able to reconnect with the Lord in a deeply profound and personal way, and
 - knows that the Lord is with him and wants him to continue in his work as a prophet, and
 - has given him some definite purpose
- - it is because of all *this* that Elijah is then encouraged and energised and able to resume his role.

Just needing to be held for a moment

- This reminds me of when my younger son was a toddler, running around, and sooner or later he would have a tumble and hurt himself, and come to me in tears.
- But all he wanted was to be held for a short while.
- It would only be for a few minutes, of sitting quietly in my arms, and then he would hop off and be on his way again.
- I didn't need to fix anything for him, or even dry his tears - I just needed to hold him, in silence.

As for Elijah, so for Jesus?

- Maybe this is the same space that Jesus was in when he also went up the mountain to pray.
- Maybe he had a similar conversation with God as Elijah had.
- He was certainly in a situation with similarities.
- Maybe he too just needed to have that time of being in the presence of God, in the sheer silence, reconnecting and being encouraged and inspired and re-energised.
- We aren't told what takes place during this time, but we are told of some of the consequences:
 1. That Jesus makes his own way across the lake - apparently without a boat.
 2. That after an interesting engagement with Peter, he gets into the disciples' boat, and immediately the wind and waves which had been battering the boat cease.
 3. And that after reaching the other side and the crowds turn up with those who need healing - they merely need touch the fringe of his cloak for that healing to take place - another indication of the divine power that was emanating from Jesus.
- I think it helpful if we slightly separate out the story of what the disciples experience on the lake from what Jesus experiences.

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- The disciples benefit from where Jesus is, but they do have a different experience to what Jesus experiences.

As for Jesus, so for us?

- And I think that we acknowledge - as followers and disciples of Jesus in our own right - that what Jesus does in going up the mountain to meet with God in solitude, is a reminder and a model for our own engagement with God.
- I realise that not being able to meet with God in the sacred space of our church building for quite a few months now might be disappointing and perhaps frustrating.
- And likewise with not being able to gather together for our communal worship.
- This is why I find these stories of Elijah and Jesus meeting with God alone, and not in a designated sacred space, comforting.
- It is a reminder that we don't necessarily have to encounter God where we might normally expect to be in his presence.
- Remember what I pointed out earlier: The Lord becomes most present with the absence of everything else.
- I think that this time of isolation, of the stage 4 lockdown, is perhaps an opportunity for us to encounter God in a new way - in a deeply profound way.
- Maybe we can do what Elijah did, and tell God about our passions, our laments, and our fears.
- And in the quietness of the lockdown, with the busyness of our normal living curtailed and reduced, maybe we can be aware of God actually listening to us, and hearing us.
- Maybe we can allow ourselves to engage with the real presence of God - and really know God holding us quietly in the midst of our need.
- Maybe we might sense God encouraging us and re-energising us in unexpected ways, directing us to fulfil his desire and purpose.

Stumbling on water, worshipping the Lord

- I'm going to conclude by reflecting very briefly on the only other person to walk on water - that wonderfully imperfect disciple, Peter.
- Just to quickly state that I encourage you not to get hung up about the literal notion of people walking on water.
- Peter's reaction to Jesus on the water is more important than the factuality of Jesus on the water.
- So it can be helpful to treat this story like another parable.
- And Peter is an inspiration for all disciples, for all of us, in our own engagement with Jesus.
'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' (NRSV Matthew 14.28)
- And, given the command, Peter steps out in faith.
- As one commentary says:
Peter models the mixture of boldness and fear, strength and weakness, characteristic of all. Believers can make their own his cry for rescue and feel, as he felt, the Lord's strong hand reaching out to draw them up from the deep.¹
- And then find, when we have invited Jesus into our boat, that the battering of the wind and the waves ceases, and in the quiet of that moment worship him, and acknowledge him to be truly the Son of God.

¹ Lifting the Burden, by Brandon Byrne SJ, 2004 St Pauls Publications