

In 1 Kings Chapter 18, just before today's Old Testament reading, there's the account of a contest between the prophet Elijah and 450 prophets of Baal.

You might know the story: The Baal priests went first, putting the pieces of their sacrifice on wood, and they prayed to Baal for fire, but there was no answer. They danced around their offering, and Elijah even taunted them to "pray louder", and the priests ranted and cut themselves but received no answer from Baal.

And then Elijah prepared his offering, on a rebuilt altar, putting the pieces of the bull on the wood. He had a trench dug around the altar and filled it with water. And then Elijah had water poured over the wood. And then more water. And then more water.

Then Elijah simply prayed over the sacrifice: No ranting, no dancing, no cutting. Just an earnest prayer.

And we read that "Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!" (1 Kings 18:38-39).

What a mighty victory! What a mighty witness to the power of God!

And it seems that Elijah rejoiced in God's victory: "Then Elijah commanded them, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!" (18:40)

Elijah was not the forgiving sort, and he was zealous: Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away. We read in verse 40

that they seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there. All 450.

And that sets the scene for today's reading as we read in verse 1 of Chapter 19 "Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword."

Jezebel, wasn't the forgiving sort, either. She sent a message to Elijah threatening him. And despite Elijah's victory over the prophets of Baal, 1 Kings 19:3 tells us that Elijah was afraid and ran for his life...

He fled from Mount Carmel, where the challenge had taken place, to Beersheba where he left his servant and went alone into the wilderness, travelling for a day, sat down under a broom tree, and prayed that he'd die: "'I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.'"

He's come a long way from his victory over the prophets of Baal, hasn't he?

Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

Even when Elijah is giving up, God is providing for him...

The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he travelled forty

days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night. (19:7-9)

Elijah took shelter in a cave on the very mountain of God, and while Elijah was sheltering in that cave, God challenged him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” he asks. Or in other translations: “Why are you here?”

Elijah gives a thorough response:

““I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.” (19:10)

His response is certainly thorough, but I don't think it really answers the question. He claims his own great faithfulness – “I have been very zealous”, he blames others “the Israelites have rejected your covenant”, and details their wrongdoing – tearing down altars and putting prophets to the sword. And then he laments “I am the only one left” and despairs “and now they are trying to kill me too”.

I think we can all relate to that. We've done the right thing, as asked, but others have failed to do their bit or let you down or even turned on us? Failed, but not through our fault? It's not a nice place to be, and it's a very human response to run away, to get out of the situation, to take refuge – maybe not in a cave, but to withdraw – to go somewhere that feels safe and secure - to lament and to despair.

And when people we know are in such a position, our usual responses are sympathy and encouragement. Or perhaps, if we're the ones that have let them down, to make excuses for our own failings.

But when it's not our fault, we'll generally sympathise with their position, we tell them that we know and understand how they feel, and we encourage them to put the experience behind them and move on. Hopefully we don't simply pat them on the head and say "There, there, it will be okay" – nor do we say "What do you have to moan about?" Hopefully. Though I expect we all slip from time to time.

But God doesn't do those things. There's certainly no flippant dismissal of Elijah's situation from God, but neither does it seem there's sympathy or encouragement. Instead, something quite amazing happens.

And God is God. God knew, better than Elijah himself, why Elijah was sheltering in this cave. What he'd done at Mt Carmel. Why he'd fled. How he'd given up. God knew. And God still asked.

We read that God said to Elijah, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." (19:11).

Then we read that "Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind". Genesis 1 tells us of the wind or spirit of God hovering over the waters at the moment of creation, and so naturally we start to think that the great and powerful wind is the presence of God. But the Lord, we read, was not in the wind.

And then the earthquake! Again, it seems that God is being revealed in a mighty display of power... but the Lord was not in the earthquake.

And then, after the earthquake, a fire. I guess much like the fire with which Elijah had shown up the prophets of Baal. But this time, the Lord was not in the fire.

And after the fire... came something quite different: a gentle whisper.

That's the description in our NIV translation, but other translations give us slightly different descriptions of the sound, the soft whisper of a voice (Good News) and a sound of sheer silence (NRSV)

Most famously famously, the King James Version tells us that after the fire came "a still small voice."

But however, it is described, Elijah heard it, and went and stood at the mouth of the cave.

The contrast between the wind, earthquake and fire with what came after, encouraged Elijah to leave the shelter of the cave. To step out, in faith.

I think this is often how we encounter God. It's not in the noise or the disasters or crises we experience, but in the quiet that comes after them. We might not encounter God in the inferno of a bushfire sweeping through houses, but we see God revealed in the outpouring of generosity and the new life afterward, we might wonder where God is in a shooting massacre at a school, but we can see God at work afterward, bringing together people to remember, to grieve and pray together that such a tragedy will lead to some positive outcome.

After the wind and earthquake and fire, in the sound of silence, the still small voice of God is revealed. After the noise, a whisper. After

the chaos, tranquillity. After the clash and conflict, peace – the peace of God which Paul in his letter to the Philippians reminds us surpasses all understanding (Philippians 4:7).

And again, God speaks to Elijah: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Again, Elijah responds: “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.” It’s the same response as he gave earlier – verse 14 is the same as verse 10.

The same words, but I think they now have a different meaning because Elijah is now ready to continue. Somehow in this encounter, he has been strengthened by God. God tells him to go back the way he came, and then go further go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram.” Anointing kings is the work of the prophet. Samuel anointed David. And we often regard John’s baptism of Jesus as the anointing of him as the messiah, the Christ.

It’s a bit odd, though, that he’s anointing Hazael as king over Aram, because they are the bad guys.

But God tells him to “Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel” – which would mean that Ahab’s days were numbered, and not just as king: Because there was no succession in those days, you remained king until you were dead, and once another king was anointed you were living on borrowed time.

The third anointing Elijah is commanded to carry out is that of “Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet” - In that command, Elijah knows his mission as God’s prophet is almost

complete. (And we'll look at the succession from Elijah to Elisha next week in church).

Always with God, there is hope. After the winds and storms and fires that we all face, the gentle whisper of God is there for us - to comfort us and to encourage us. There is the offer of salvation: God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world (John 3:17).

Of course, even when we have come to know Jesus, it's not all easy. Sometimes we all need to run away, to take refuge from things. To be strengthened by God, just as Elijah was.

And there should be no shame in needing time out, needing to withdraw. It is a very human thing. We read in the Gospel accounts of Jesus withdrawing from the crowds when he learned of the death of his cousin John the Baptist, and of him going alone to pray in anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before he died.

Jesus knows the pain and hurt and exhaustion of being human. The pain and hurt and exhaustion that Elijah felt, and that we all feel from time to time.

Elijah is one of the great heroes of the bible, but he's also flawed. After his victory over the prophets of Baal, he has them all killed, and then gets scared and runs. He doesn't think he's good enough to continue as God's prophet. He wants to die!

And sometimes I think we all feel we're not good enough to do important things for God.

Hopefully, we do all know the gospel message – the good news that Jesus came to save us all. That God so loved the world that he gave

his only son, and that whoever believes in him shall not die, but have eternal life.

We are all fallen. None of us are worthy of God. But God forgives us – and we were reminded of that each week in our worship service, we collectively confess our sins, and we are reminded of the forgiveness we have through Jesus.

And we should be thankful to God, because, no matter what our sins, no matter what our failings, no matter what our wrongdoings, no matter how greedy we've been, no matter what our habits, or our prejudices or our attitudes, we do have forgiveness in Christ.

It is an amazing thing that we are forgiven in Christ – not because of what we've done – not because of our good works or faithful prayers or contributions to charities, but because we have turned to Jesus in faith, and put our trust in him.

And yet... and yet... we often find ourselves not appreciating what that means. We often find ourselves doubting whether we are worthy of being God's servants. To take on the roles that God calls us to take on. To proclaim the good news of Jesus.

And I don't mean standing on street corners reciting scriptures wearing a sandwich board that says "Repent for the end is nigh". Rather, we're called to proclaim the good news by living our lives in the way that God wants us to, and being witnesses to all that Jesus has done.

It's not an easy task, and from time to time we will need to withdraw. To be quiet. To reflect. To pray. To be strengthened by God, just like Elijah was.

Remember Jesus' words from Matthew's gospel: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matt 11:29-30).

Our call as the church – and as individuals – is to take on that yoke, to share the good news with the world. To be zealous. To not rely on our own strength, but on God's strength. To take time out when we need to, in order to be strengthened by God.

God is not in the wind.

God is not in the earthquake.

God is not in the fire.

God is not in the terrorist attack, nor in the school shooting, nor the invasion of Ukraine.

But God, the God who loves us with an everlasting love, the God who sent his Son to save us all, is in the sound of sheer silence after all those tragedies have passed.

Not in the wind. Not in the earthquake. Not in the fire.

But in the still small voice.

The gentle whisper that spoke to Elijah, is the gentle whisper still speaks to us today, and the gentle whisper that still strengthens us today.

Amen