**“What are you doing there? 1 Kings 19. Sunday June 19, 2022**

Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela, and Fred Hollows are names that resonate with specific activities, their work continues to outlive them as individuals. Each of them drew other like-minded people around them and their work expanded during their life-times. Though they made unique contributions in pioneering work during their lives, they were not indispensable. The communities that they nurtured have continued their work.

The story we read today features one of the most well-known prophets of Israel. Elijah had a reputation as one who troubled Israel, he was prepared to confront and challenge Kings and to trust God to act powerfully so that the people may believe.[[1]](#footnote-1) This story follows on after Elijah’s famous encounter with the prophets of Baal. Baal was worshipped as a god who brought prosperity and rain, both things that Israel needed in this time of drought and famine. Elijah was seen by the Baal worshippers as seen as a “traitor disturbing the tranquillity and prosperity of Israel”.[[2]](#footnote-2)

It is a story that touches on the practical realities of life in stressful situations. His immediate needs are addressed.

Despite his outstanding faith in God whilst confronting the prophets of Baal, ever so quickly, discouragement grips Elijah. Jezebel threatens to kill him and fear consumes him, he immediately fled in the hope of saving his life. Unsurprisingly Elijah, exhausted and disappointed begins to unload his frustration to God. He is drained and overwhelmed by his circumstances. His words are similar to the words of Moses when he was exhausted from leading the Israelites through the wilderness.[[3]](#footnote-3) Like Moses he is so drained he wishes that he would die. e

The reality of feeling drained during stressful times is an experience, with which I am sure we can all identify. The response of God to Elijah’s state paints a beautiful picture of the sensitive, loving care that God gives to each of us. Elijah is nourished refreshed and rested, tended by the angel of the Lord, not just once but twice.[[4]](#footnote-4) Elijah’s practical needs were honoured, and he is given space for his complaints to be truly heard.

Elijah’s complaints betrayed the power of emotions to skew thinking. We learnt in the previous chapter that Obadiah had managed to provide refuge for one hundred of Israel’s prophets. When Elijah defeats the prophets of Baal through God providing fire to consume his offering, we read that, ***“****When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, ‘The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.’”* Then when God does respond to Elijah, God *says, “I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.’”* So Elijah’s repeated statements about being the only one left [[5]](#footnote-5) are clearly not factually accurate but certainly give as an honest insight into his distress. The response of God to Elijah’s complaints again reinforces God’s understanding of our humanity, our individuality, our weaknesses and stress points. Elijah is the recipient of God’s patient care as he processes his experiences and moves towards being able to engage once again with his calling. The emphasis on the reality that there were indeed other followers of God still active in Israel, reminds us about the importance of community, the reality that we are created to relate to others, and that our lives are enhanced as we give ourselves to others.

Elijah is encouraged to encounter God afresh. Whilst Elijah was resting in a cave at Mt Horeb God begins to challenge him regarding what he is doing there and asks him to go and stand on the mountain as the Lord is about to pass by. Now it appears that Elijah did not do this but rather stayed in the cave. There appears to be significant hesitancy about his response to God. Then comes the wind, the earthquake and the fire. Awe inspiring signs were seen as characteristic of the activity of the gods in the ancient Near East and indeed the God of Israel had been identified with spectacular signs.[[6]](#footnote-6)

However, the author is quite clear that the God of Israel was not in the wind, earthquake or fire. The presence of Elijah’s God is not being seen now through spectacular signs. Then comes the turning point in the story, “the still small voice”[[7]](#footnote-7) or “a gentle whisper”[[8]](#footnote-8) or the “sound of sheer silence”[[9]](#footnote-9). Elijah’s God was using the quietness to capture his attention. The quietness was powerful, confronting and prompted Elijah to venture towards the mouth of the cave. He covered his face with his cloak, as a sign of his reverence, humility and awe. Yet again the Lord asks Elijah what he is doing there. He has the opportunity to encounter God afresh, yet he is still in the cave, but at least now he is moving towards God, moving in reverence towards the One who has been ministering to him, seeking him out and drawing him to move ahead. Elijah responds each time to the Lord’s question, “What are you doing here?” in the same way. He recites what he has been doing as he has sought to serve God. Elijah has a limited view of reality, he is seeing everything through a cloudy lens produced by his own distress and despondency.

He needs to see the bigger picture. Part of the process of moving ahead will be acknowledging that he is not alone as he commissions and mentors Elisha the prophet who will eventually take over the work Elijah has been doing. Throughout the ensuing chapters we read of the activities of various prophets in Israel including Elijah.

There are times when each of us needs refreshment and renewal, times when our vigour has dissipated, or our vision has become cloudy. In the life of the Christian church we see that there have been some remarkable times of renewal on a large scale or on a small scale. Just as God cared for Elijah in his time of need so we too can be assured that God is there to care for us. As God renewed his sense of vision and recommissioned him to continue to use his gifts in God’s service, so God also can renew our vision and inspire us in the mission we are called to. We have been reflecting recently on the work of God’s Spirit in the church as comforter, encourager, the One who makes Christ real to us.

There are times when we may have moved away from God, when we may be hiding in our own cave, hesitant to come to close to God. In such times we may need to hear God asking us, “What are you doing there?” and it may be wise to think carefully about how we respond. It may be wise to recognise that none of us is indispensable, that we are called into a community, to give of ourselves in company with others. We are not alone, God has chosen to call us together, to share our lives as children of God, to love one another, to serve one another.

There may be unexpected times when in the quietness God manages to capture our attention and to help us to see what we should do next. God is not locked into any one mode of appearing. Sometimes God is known through ordinary unspectacular ways. God’s voice may be present in the midst of what may appear to be God’s silence.[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. 1 Kings 18:17-18 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. August H. Konkel, The NIV Application Commentary: 1 and 2 Kings, (Grand Rapids , Michigan: Zondervan Press, 2006) 306 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Numbers 11:14-15 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 1 Kings 19:5-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 1 Kings 19:10, 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John Walton, Victor H. Matthews and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary, Old Testament: 1 Kings,* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2000) 380 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 1 Kings 19:12b KJB [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 1 Kings 19:12b NIV [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 1 Kings 19:12b NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Choon-Leong Seow, “1 Kings: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” in Leander E. Keck et al. (Eds.) *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1999) 145

    1 and 2 Kings: The NIV Application Commentary, 308 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)