

Behind the Waterfall – Sickness of the Soul

1 Kings 19:1-18 / 2 Corinthians 1:8-11

“A process in the weather of the heart” is the title of a quite extraordinary and evocative poem by Dylan Thomas. People of the British Isles are obsessed with weather, yet we can do almost nothing about it. In how many countries are Wellington boots essential kit for family summer holidays “just in case”? As a kid I used to wear a thick parka to school on blazing hot summer days “just in case”!

What process is taking place in the weather of your heart? If only it were easier to control the happenings of our hearts. I once read a wonderfully buoyant book called “How to live in High Victory”. If only life were that simple. Fortunately the Bible, and especially the Old Testament, makes no pretence. Among people who suffered mental anguish to one degree or another were Abraham, Jonah, Job, Cain, David, Jeremiah, Saul, Elijah, Peter and Paul.

Let's take Elijah as an example.

Here is a man under extreme pressure. Burdened by what he's seen going on in the nation Elijah had then to deliver a severe drought warning from God to the king. The drought lasted three years, during which Elijah was hunted for high and low as one who'd surely have both answers and power to change the situation. After three years as a fugitive, hunted by the Old Testament version of Interpol and sheltered by a nameless widow, God tells him to go back and see the king. On his way, he's informed that Ahab has murdered all but a hundred prophets, who were hidden in two caves.

When he arrives, he organises one of the most extraordinary confrontations of all time, the powers of 450 prophets of Baal against himself only, with the Lord. Not many of us enjoy confrontation – imagine the pressure here. The stand-off ends with huge bloodshed as the opposing prophets are slaughtered. Then Elijah announces that rain is on its way, but is it? He climbs to the top of Mount Carmel to look for the merest sign. Seven times he asks his servant to look out towards the sea, and then they see a cloud, the size of a man's hand. Have you ever had to keep your nerve? It's tiring isn't it? Elijah had to keep his nerve for more than three years. Now it looks like his job might finally be done. Yet

as Elijah's splashing home through welling puddles he receives a message from queen Jezebel: "You slaughtered 450 of my prophets – prepare to join them in the dirt."

So at the start of 1 Kings 19 we meet Elijah as a man exhausted, under pressure, on the run, having come out from hiding after three years, been victor in a draining political showdown, now in fear of his life, wracked with self doubt and covering himself with accusations of futility and failure. That's the beginning of 1 Kings Chapter 19, and here we get the first indication of what's going on in Elijah's heart.

I want to ask what's going on for Elijah and how does God handle him?

Firstly, "**Elijah was afraid.**" (v.3) Words are funny things. If I say "I'm scared" I generally associate it with a passing situation - when a lorry just misses me or I'm about to see the dentist. If I say "I'm afraid" it seems to capture a more on-going state. If I'm "scared" of something I feel I can easily resolve to capture and master it. If I'm "afraid" of something I feel anxious that it's going to capture and master me. What makes you feel afraid? Sickness of the soul, depression, mental anguish are often prisons in which we're locked by fear. Identifying those fears, talking about them and taming them, often provide keys to set us free.

Secondly, Elijah was exhausted. "I've had enough Lord." he says. He can't *take* any more or *give* any more. A while ago someone said something to me and I thought, "I've had enough! I'm not going to be used as a punch bag any longer!" Has that happened to you? Well, when these things happen we need to organise ourselves because if we don't, the poison turns inward and our souls become sickened. Elijah had no strategies left. He curled in the desert and prepared to die.

Thirdly, *Elijah was giving up. "Take my life, Lord."* he said. He's run out of hope. What's the point? Now, Elijah was in a desperate situation but that question comes to most us at some time, and the answers offered don't usually sound too convincing. Perhaps you said it at school, or your children did, struggling with homework in a subject they had no interest in. "What's the point?" And when that question becomes too big, it's all too easy to say, "I don't even want to live."

So he was afraid, exhausted, giving up...

Finally, *Elijah was judging himself*. **“I'm no better than my ancestors.”** Why did Elijah think this? He'd just made an amazingly heroic stand. Was he ashamed now of running away? Depression and other forms of soul sickness are all about our self-perception. When your heart condemns you, the apostle John said, know this: **“God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything.”** (1Jn 3:20) Don't be fooled by your heart: We live daily in God's forgiveness.

So **“Elijah lay down... and fell asleep.”** It's a picture of abject exhaustion. Let's see how God deals with the great prophet.

First of all again, *God met Elijah where he was*. While Elijah was asleep the angel **“touched him.”**(v.5) There's no rebuke from God; there's no reprimand for his desire to end it all. God meets us right in the centre of our anguish – sometimes touching so gently that we're barely aware of it. This Old Testament God, so often caricatured as angry, is actually so gracious. Do you need to know the gentle touch of God meeting you right where you are?

Secondly, *God woke Elijah*. In fact he had to do it twice, in verses 5 and 7. **“Get up”** he says, and we can take this as a metaphor for all the ways God wakes us up. He allows us to sleep through the exhaustion, to hide through the fear, to cover ourselves over, to pretend the world doesn't exist; but this isn't where God wants to leave us. **“Get up!”** Do you need to allow yourself to be woken up afresh by God's spirit?

Thirdly, *God fed Elijah*. **“There by his head was a cake of baked bread and a jar of water.”** The provision is a mystery. Someone must have put it there, but God is clearly behind it. So many Christians try to prove their passionate commitment by neglecting their own basic needs. “The more tired I am, the thinner I am, the more it proves my passion for God and his work.” Here God is saying, “If I look after you, how much more should you look after yourself.” Elijah had more to come in his ministry, and in order to fulfill the next leg, he needed refreshment. Is that a message to you?

So God *met* him, he *woke* him, he *fed* him...

Fourthly, *God led Elijah*. **“Strengthened by the food, he travelled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.”** (v.8) It was a place of wild holiness, untarnished by human politics and presumptions. There was no map dropped from the sky, but the Spirit of God was

moving Elijah at the deepest level. It's a homing instinct – and many people seek God because of it. “*Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you*” said Augustine. Elijah needed to lay his head, replenish his heart, and ground his soul. And my vision for St James the Less is to be a place where people -us - find that “home” - a true, secure, growthful home, a place of gentleness and growing laughter, where truth can be uncovered and joy can be renewed. And those who come will say, “God led me here.” Is that your story? I believe God leads us at a deep, deep level.

Fifthly, *God questioned Elijah*. “**The word of the Lord came to him: What are you doing here, Elijah?**” (v.9b) We we've lost our way we need to listen to those questions. There's no accusation. There's not even challenge. The Spirit's skilfully using this question to help Elijah vocalise where he's at.

And what are *you* doing here? Perhaps you're finding shelter; perhaps you're seeking strength; perhaps you're gaining nourishment; perhaps you're ready to serve; maybe you're refocusing; maybe you're starting to branch out; perhaps you're rejoicing in new life; maybe you're beginning to chuckle or weep with renewed hope; maybe you're up and down - and it's a safe place to be up and down in; maybe you're so glad to be in the company of friends. God asked the question for Elijah to vocalise his own answer.

He met him, he woke him, he fed him, he led him, he questioned him...

Sixthly, *God revealed himself to Elijah*. “**If you seek me, you will find me when you seek me with all your heart.**” And God revealed himself *not* in the earthquake, *not* in the fire, but “**after the fire came a gentle whisper**” - the still, small voice of calm. All sorts of things can bring about sickness of soul: exhaustion, repeated attack, belittling, deliberate sin, tragedy, disappointment, the march of years. But God speaks to us with a voice we can receive. “**In quietness and confidence is your strength,**” says the Lord (Isaiah 30:15) Elijah stood on the side of the mountain and waited – as God told him to. Where is *your* place to meet with God? Maybe you need to let him show you. If you stop, look, and listen – maybe on your own, maybe with others, maybe in the prayer meeting, maybe in the home group, or in church, God *will* speak to you.

Seventhly, *God questioned Elijah again*. “**What are you doing here Elijah?**” I don't want to

spend more time on that except to say that God questions him again because things change, and people change. Elijah gives exactly the answer he gave previously, but you can feel that as he says it he knows things are beginning to move on. What happens to you when you let God question you again? Does the first answer still suffice or is the Spirit calling a new answer from within you?

Eighthly, *God directed Elijah*. **“Go back the way you came”** (v.15)

It's a direction, not a rebuke. I'm sending you on a mission – a renewed mission. Sometimes it means going *off*, sometimes it means going *back*. When our souls laboured, everything seems meaningless. But God has a purpose. Here the words are quite specific, and the Spirit does speak specifically: “Go to work” “love your partner” “care for your family” “pray for your church” “speak to your neighbour”. None of us need accept the sense of futility that so often accompanies sickness of the soul. How is the Spirit speaking to you?

Ninthly, *God gave hope*. Elijah had thought he was alone. Looming largest in his mind was that so many of his fellow prophets had been killed and that his life too was under threat. But in vv.16-18 God reveals real people who will become real allies. In fact, there are more than 7000 of them! All of us need the real friendship of real people – that's how real hope comes.

Someone put the food out for Elijah to find! *Someone* had pity! *Someone* showed compassion! *Someone* saved his life! *Someone* was a friend – *someone* was an ally. Who has God placed for you to befriend? All sickness of the soul includes deep loneliness. Elijah curls up to sleep *alone*. But God is with him. In that secret place God gently nudges him, awakens him. Gradually he can realise there are thousands of others like him – faithful ones, ready to be allies in the fight for life.

We don't need words alone in this titanic battle; prophecies and revelations are not meant to suffice; we also need real people in the real world to be real friends, true supporters, shoulder to shoulder. Don't accept isolation – seek alliance, seek strength, make hope happen – and make it happen for those around you as well.

Look at this God! What an amazing God we have! Yes, there are difficult aspects to the Old Testament. But look at the tenderness of this God – that's what shines through – one who understands so deeply sickness of the human soul. This is a God who knows eternally what it's like to be wounded himself – but that's another story.