

### Third Sunday after Trinity

I Kings 19.1-15a; Galatians 3.23-29; Luke 8.26-39

I've always been both appalled and fascinated by the character of Elijah. He is the archetypal prophet who bounds on to the scene as though from nowhere and announces the judgment of God. His first act is to proclaim a drought in response to the greed and cruelty of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Last week we had him confronting Ahab about the murder of Naboth and his theft of his vineyard, before that he had raised from the death the son of the widow of Zarephath. If the calendar had been different we would have started the Sundays after Trinity with his challenge to prophets of Baal to a contest which ends in a bloodbath of his own making. If you wanted a human expression of the wrath of God, Elijah would be your man.

He represents a profound anger at injustice and wrongdoing; a prophetic zeal for justice and truth. We know the kind of person he represents. Angry for justice. Impatient at institutional failure. Deeply moved by the plight of the poor. Such people are sometimes a pain. But they are also necessary. At the very least they push us and provoke us into honesty.

They often seem utterly fearless but prophets like Elijah are not without vulnerability. People sometimes speak of depression as anger turned inwards. Well perhaps anger can also be depression turned inwards. Such anger comes from a heart ready to break at human wickedness; a will that has to be armoured to survive constant disappointment. Our reading today finds Elijah for the first time frightened. He runs away from his royal persecutors. He has had enough. He is above all desperately alone. 'I alone am left and they seek my life to take it away'. In fact he wants to die. But God does not want Elijah to die. He lets him have a nap, then provides an

instant hot breakfast, served by an angel and then sends him storming off through the wilderness to Mt Horeb, the Mount of God – which traditionally is two thirds of the way up Mt Sinai. I've been there on a camel and had a picnic lunch. What follows is, I suppose, one of the great encounters of the Bible. Elijah who has called God down in fire, Elijah who has commanded a drought and then raised it with a thunderstorm, is confronted with a God who has suddenly removed himself from the violence of nature. He has removed himself from Elijah's anger, righteous though it is. He is not in the earthquake, wind or fire, but present only in the 'sound of sheer silence' as our translation puts it.

The Hebrew word for sound is the same as the word for voice: as though anything that makes a sound is articulating itself as a voice. And yet this is not quite the 'still small voice of calm' that we shall sing about later. The sound is more like a murmur, like a stream flowing, like life living, like the sound of the earth and the grass just before dawn or just after sunset. There is no wrath, judgment, no message at all – though God speaks both before and after asking the same question, 'What are you doing here, Elijah'?

We'll come back to that.

Our Gospel is pivoted around a question too. The naked maniac who runs from the tombs on to the shore to meet Jesus, shouting at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the most high God?'. This is a soul in torment, an internal rabble of voices and impulses and pain and fear. The fear is perhaps the worst thing. Nowhere is safe, nothing, not chains or shackles or injuries can restrain him. And Jesus comes across the lake, unafraid, and goes right to the heart of the pain with the question, 'What is your name?' And he cannot give his name, he is so divided that he can only call

himself, “‘Legion’ for we are a many.” So Jesus addresses not the individual but the 500 armed men who swarm within him. The picture is that they are from hell, from the place where destruction cannot end. They ask, instead for an end, and Jesus mercifully sends them into the herd of pigs, the unclean to the unclean, and there rushing off the edge of cliff the demons can find the oblivion they long for. When the terrified swineherds eventually return to the scene they find the man, sitting quietly with Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.

This is a bit like what happens at Mt Horeb. Elijah having heard the sound of silence, wraps his face in his mantle and stands before God at the entrance of the cave. Both Elijah and the maniac have been driven to the edge of despair and perhaps beyond it. And at that point neither of them really want to have much to do with God. Elijah comes with his litany of complaint, almost, one feels daring God to wipe him out in the earthquake, wind and fire. And the poor mad man is simply terrified at the approach of Christ. This rings true for me. Often when in the throes of sickness or bereavement people don't find themselves comforted by faith. Faith becomes almost a burden, a reproach, and the suffering of the moment seems to wipe out any sense of God's love or care or compassion. In fact people feel guilty and ashamed, as though they are to blame for being sick or sad or in need.

Yet both stories reveal something of God's deep concern for people at their most vulnerable. God is with Elijah in his flight, the angel who acts as chef and waiter proves that, and the arrival of Jesus in the land of the Gerasenes show how he is led into this unclean land to heal this one individual. So God is not ashamed of us, God does not blame us when we are vulnerable. But this still needs some teasing out. Vulnerability can become rather a fashionable word in Christian

theology. It is a good thing for those caring for others to be vulnerable, Christ was vulnerable and so like us, etc. And of course in one sense that is true. We want those who care for us to know that they too are capable of feeling pain. It is the basis of empathy.

But the implication of these stories is that vulnerability is not something to be trailed around like a trophy. 'I feel your pain'. God does not rejoice in our vulnerabilities; he is not pleased when we are hurt, as though it gives us street cred. You know, I too have suffered, I too am a victim, I too had a dreadful childhood. God does not ask us all the time to parade our psychic nakedness; he actually prefers us to be clothed and in our right mind. There is something so touching about that little phrase in the Gospel, when the swineherds return. Where the clothes have come from we don't know, but he is dressed, content, the awful drama is over, the demons have departed. He is himself again.

'As many of you as have been baptised into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ', says St Paul to the Galatians. That is an astonishing sentence, an astonishing claim. To be clothed in Christ is to wear the fullness of humanity, so that in the many dyings and risings, the sicknesses and healings that make up our ordinary lives we are always enclosed, enfolded in his love. To be enclosed, enfolded in Christ's love is what it means to be properly and truly human. Children of the heavenly Father.

And of course if we really were properly human; if we really were enclosed and enfolded in Christ's love, if we really knew what it meant to be baptised into Christ, there would be no need for that were true of all of us all the time there would be no need for prophets like Elijah to come storming out of the wilderness and the troubled man among the tombs would have been seen as sick and not possessed.