

What are you doing here?

Canon Bill Goodes

Second Sunday after Pentecost 2022 I Kings 19:1-4., 8-15a,
Psalm 42, Galatians 3:10 – 14, 23 – 29, Luke 8:26 – 39:

“What are you doing here, Elijah?” (I Kings 19:9, 13)

Well, there’s a challenge for you! It was a challenge for Elijah, and it is just as much a challenge for us. “What are you doing here?”

It came to Elijah who was feeling pretty depressed, Queen Jezebel, in all her power and deviousness, had made a public statement, on oath, that Elijah’s head was for the block! Having a contract put on you by such a person would justify anyone fleeing for their life. And Elijah had run for six weeks from Israel and finished up at Mount Sinai, the mountain of God.

We can feel a certain sympathy with the prophet here, as he answers the voice of God by saying “I have been very zealous for the Lord of hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant...killed your prophets...I alone am left, and they are seeking my life!” When we think of how things used to be, and how this occasion would see the Church filled with parishioners and members of the Great Priory and their families and friends, we might well be feeling “I alone am left...!” For that’s not how things are today: we look around at who we are, all too conscious of our age and our many infirmities, and feel very much with the prophet. And God says to us “What are you doing here?”

God responds to the prophet in two ways. First, he shows Elijah something of God’s nature, and goes on to speak of God’s continuing call for the prophet.

God's nature? "Stand on the mountain before the Lord" Then came the tempestuous wind, ripping the countryside to shreds – "but the Lord was not in the wind". Then came the trembling of the foundations as the earth rocked – "but the Lord was not in the earthquake". Then came a wild-fire, fearsome and destructive in its intensity – "but the Lord was not in the fire". After the fire, "a sound of sheer silence" or "a mere whisper" – the older translations spoke of "a still small voice." Elijah then covered his face, stood outside the cave, and heard again the challenging voice "What are you doing here, Elijah?" I wonder whether his carefully rehearsed response might have been delivered a little more hesitantly in the face of this display of God's presence (and God's absence!).

There are some very loud voices in our experience, sounding like wind, earthquake, fire: these voices clamour for our attention, saying "This is where the power is – you've got to listen to us! Listen to our message of wars and rumours of wars, of broken-down systems, of terrible behaviour by people who ought to know better and yet who are in positions of authority themselves. Listen to our message that says there is no reality other than the material world around us. Listen to our message that says there is nothing that you can do." God's message to the prophet comes in the quiet which the desert is so capable of – a silence in which one might hear God's message, God's challenge, God's call, God's reassurance.

God's call comes to Elijah in two parts: first he is to go and anoint some new leaders – in Aram, Syria, that power which is the greatest threat to Israel's peace. The passage goes on after the part we read, to speak of Israel, anointing Jehu to be king – which means that Jezebel is to get her come-uppance at the hands of one "who drives furiously". Then, in the prophetic field, Elisha is to take over from Elijah himself, for Elijah is about to come to the end of the ministry in which he has been so loyal. And the call has a reassurance

at the end of it, "Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel" who have remained steadfast in their loyalty to the Lord God. Elijah is *not* the only one left!

What is God's call to us, as we put those loud voices behind us, and listen to God in the sound of sheer silence? Do we look for new leaders, even if we know that they will "drive furiously"? Do we anticipate our own dying, the ending of things as we know them, so that another may come in our place? But whatever lies ahead of us, God's assurance remains, "there are still seven thousand in Israel" – we are not alone in our loyalty to the Lord, the God of hosts", in spite of how few and how weak we seem to be.

The question "What are you doing here?" comes with a challenge, not only to Elijah, but also to us. And there is another challenge in today's readings. Jesus comes to the Gerasene man, clearly in need of healing, and Jesus is greeted with the challenge, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" That challenge continues, after the man is healed, and appears "clothed and in his right mind", when the villagers come out to see what has happened. Faced not only with the healed man, but also the loss of a herd of pigs, they "asked Jesus to leave them". The man wants to go with Jesus, but is told, "Return home, and tell how much God has done for you."

Even in our loyalty to the Lord of Hosts, we too are tempted to challenge Jesus with the same message, "What have you to do with me?" Somehow we find Jesus' presence even more confronting than the still small voice with which God can speak with us. We have our ways of "asking him to leave" – I remember when our present Archbishop came to this Church for the first time, one of the comments someone made was "Too much mention of Jesus!" Perhaps it is because of the kind of challenge that Jesus gave the Gerasene man, and confronts us as well – "Return to your home and tell how much God has done for you".

“What are you doing here?”

“What have you to do with me?”

And perhaps for us, nearly as challenging are the words of Paul to the Church in Galatia, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Can we make this real in our particular circumstances?