

I have long loved this story of Elijah. This intimate account of a man depleted and so exhausted by the demands of his calling that he runs away into the desert – that most barren and dead of symbolic places – and pleads with God to take away his life...

My love of this story dates from a particularly hard period of my own ministry when I was in my 20s. I was looking after 4 churches in the Fens, working in a team of 2 retired and one senior minister. Within the space of 3 days the two retired ministers died and before the senior minister and I could bury them, he himself had a brain haemorrhage and then died here in Addenbrookes, never having regained consciousness. I was left with 3 ministers to bury; with 9 congregations to lead; with only 15 months experience of ministry, and a sense that I did not have the resources to cope. Many times I was at the end of my tether, finding myself, if not in the desert, in a very barren place in the landscape of my soul... asking God to let me sleep, not caring whether or not I woke up.

The context of Elijah's misery was a three year drought. In his flight to the desert, therefore, Elijah's hunger and thirst was not merely his own. It represents the physical exhaustion of the land and of the people. Living in a country where a drought means only a hosepipe ban it is perhaps hard for us to appreciate what three years without rain might mean: the failure of one's crops; the death of one's cattle; the death of one's children...

So when Elijah lies down in the desert and is awoken by an angel, it is not just his own thirst that is quenched, nor his own hunger fed, nor his own despair held. It is about God's promise to Israel to make the desert spring to life... so He Qi paints the desert as a forest, as lush and as green as any landscape, brought to life by the overflowing goodness of God.

Yet, the people of Israel had forgotten that their life was in the hands of the living God. Hungry and thirsty they had become desperate for help from anywhere; desperate enough to worship any God that could bring them rain to re-green the land; desperate enough to worship the baals; desperate enough blindly to follow King Ahab and Queen Jezebel to destruction. So Elijah had challenged the prophets of baal to a firework competition on the top of Mount Carmel to demonstrate whose God could be trusted. The baals prayed all day to no effect but Elijah's God ignited his altar even though he had drenched it with water whereupon Elijah ordered the death of 450 prophets of the baal and then there was heavy rain...

As ever in the Bible, thirst is never just thirst. The thirst for water is real, but it is always connected with thirst for living water; thirst for water that will last; thirst for the living God. 'AS a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God...' Yet thirst for the living God can easily be diverted into so many idolatries; into so many false sources of hope and fulfilment. It is so much easier to believe the prophets who promise us quick fixes for our longings – the fashion companies who promise us retail therapy; the food companies who offer us sugar highs and dieting products in the same breath; the drug companies who offer us any number of narcotics and pain killers to cover up the pain that we may be in; the friends who offer us easy company into which to escape from the still small voice that knows all is not well. Few of us, when exhausted and depleted have the courage to take ourselves into a

barren place of no distractions; to let ourselves feel the worst of it; to become aware of the depth of our need: 'It is enough O Lord. Take away my life.'

And yet, it is only through the courage of what the desert fathers call, 'manifesting our thoughts' that we are likely to meet with the living God. Not that our thoughts and feelings are immediately to be acted on. In fact often the desires of hearts to escape the trouble we are in by one route or another are dead ends... and yet it is only in naming how we are feeling and what we are thinking before God, God can meet us.

'It is enough now, O Lord, take away my life. For I am no better than my ancestors.'

I remember going away on retreat after 7 months of running these 9 churches virtually on my own. I remember telling people the facts and telling them that I was fine. I even felt fine... but in that retreat house, without the diversions of work and more work and more work... I gradually started to hear a different story coming from within me... I remembered a few weeks before, standing outside the Methodist/URC in March, waiting to receive a coffin, and seeing the hearse coming down the road and finding the tears running down my cheeks and fearing I would not be able to contain them again before the coffin arrived; I remembered the terrible loneliness of walking the dog every day wondering where the resources were going to come from to write the next sermon; I remembered standing on Cley beach on New Year's eve looking at the stars after the death of my senior minister, trying to find the courage to come back and bury him.

And, in this retreat house, I decided that I needed to find a way to manifest these thoughts; to say it out loud; to hear myself say it... to admit that 'It was enough... that I had run out of resources....'

What I had not expected was to be met by an angel. I asked one of the retreat leaders to meet with me for an hour. In a few sentences I explained what I needed from her, and then the next thing I was aware of was perhaps 45 minutes of silence later, as, with tears running down her face, she crossed the room to hold me. I realised that I was folded up into the chair, with my head on my knees... puzzled, I said, 'I thought I had a lot to say.' 'You said it', she said, handing me a glass of water.

Elijah walked into the desert and manifested his thoughts... 'it is enough O Lord, take away my life' and the next thing he knew, an angel was touching him, handing him cake and water and urging him to refuel for the journey – the journey of forty days and forty nights to Mount Horeb to hear the still small voice; the journey from there to the desert of Damascus to take up his mantle again, the mantle of calling people back to the living God who can make even the desert bloom.

I have been reminded of that period of my ministry and my life this last week, partly through this reading and partly because one of the senior lay people I worked with during that time, died this week and I shall go back to the Fens next week to take part in his funeral. I was speaking to his widow on the phone yesterday, and she talked about Russell's last few months after his operation for a brain tumour and his desire to die. Nearly every day, she said, he has asked God to take him home. 'It is enough, O Lord, take away my life'. And through her tears, she said, 'God has answered his prayers and there is healing in that...' And what she meant was a re-greening of the

desert for Russell in death and even at this time, for herself, she had a sense of the goodness of the living God because amid the whirlwind and the earthquake and the fire that is wreaking havoc in her life and will go on taking it apart in the next few months, she can hear that still, small voice which waits to address any of us who have the courage to put aside our desire for quick fixes and listen to the longing of our hearts.

Elijah had the courage to journey on alone into the desert; to manifest his thoughts – even the deepest despair – the despair that longs for death; and there, in that honest place, God’s angel was able to meet him; to hold him and feed him until he could hear again that still small voice for which the human race longs...

Charles Wesley puts that longing into words in his hymn, Open thou my inward ear... (I hope you forgive me bringing a Charles Wesley hymn and a setting by one of our Wesley House students)... a hymn which urges us amid all that threatens our life and drives us to exhaustion and despair, to listen for the whisper of God’s grace...