

Proper 14 year A 2020

When Jesus heard about the murder of John the Baptist, he wanted to go to a deserted place all by himself, but the crowds gathered and 'he had compassion on them and cured their sick'. The feeding of the five thousand followed, and, after an exhausting day he dismissed the crowds and sent the disciples off in their boat. He went up the mountain to pray.

We meet Elijah on a mountain, too. Terrified of the wrath of Queen Jezebel, after he has challenged, defeated and killed all the prophets of Baal, whom she worshiped, he flees south to Beer-Sheba, way beyond the power of King Ahaz and his vengeful wife. In a story very reminiscent of the history of Moses and the Exodus, Elijah finally arrives at Mount Horeb (also called Mount Sinai), the sacred spot where Moses first encountered God in the burning bush (Ex3.1-6) and where Israel's first covenant with God was made. At that time 'the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel' (Ex24.17).

Depressed and dejected, feeling himself to be a failure, Elijah complains to God. Then come wind, earthquake and fire – but Elijah does not find God in any of these – he finds God in 'a sound of sheer silence' (sometimes translated as 'a softly whispering voice'), and for a second time he is asked by this persistent God 'Why have you come here?' And for a second time, Elijah makes his complaint. He has lost perspective and needs direction. He needs to be told he is not alone, he is not the only one who has been faithful, he is part of a faithful community; words which we need to hear as lock down drags on and on and 'common worship' remains difficult.

Life had overwhelmed Elijah and he had temporarily lost his way. It happens to all of us, which is why Sunday worship is so important. There we can gather with others who are on the same path, share our joys and sorrows, doubts and fears, frustrations and achievements, and listen to that still, small voice, that 'softly whispering voice' (often so persistent) which reminds us of the lifetime project we are all constructing together. God did not give up on Elijah, nor does he give up on us, even when we let darkness overwhelm us. Instead of a reprimand, we get a commission – as long as we are listening.

And wasn't that what Jesus was doing on the mountain after the feeding of the five thousand, listening – listening to his Father, seeking strength, courage, commitment? John's death was a warning about what lay ahead. He needed to make sure he was facing in the right direction, ready for the future and all that it would bring.

And then we have the story within the story. Matthew was writing for a battered church broken by persecution and doubt. He offers the church in Antioch his primary story, which answers the question 'Who is Jesus?', and tells them that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. Remember, most members of this church were Jewish. They now feel estranged from their families and friends because of their Christian faith. Some are wavering, some renounce their faith when they are excluded from the synagogue, there is the possibility of persecution. Matthew offers them support. Within the primary story we get the second one (a bit like the play within the play called Hamlet, prince of Denmark). Jesus is praying on the

mountain and the disciples are in the boat, battling against heavy seas and strong winds. All seems lost, even though some of them are experienced fishermen. Jesus comes to them and says 'It is I; do not be afraid'. The Greek for 'It is I' is the same as the words spoken to Moses by God at the burning bush – 'I am who I am'. Jesus is proclaiming his relationship with his Father. And how often have we heard 'Do not be afraid'? From the angel of the Lord, to Zechariah, telling him that his wife will give birth to a son who is to be called John; from Gabriel to Mary at the Annunciation; from the angel to the shepherds at the Incarnation; in a dream to Joseph as he struggles with news of Mary's pregnancy – reassurance, hope, commission. And that is what this story offers the church in Antioch – and us today – reassurance, hope, and yes, commission. If we cannot 'do church' as we have always done it, we are to find another way. Jesus comes across the troubled, troubling, waters of life and says 'do not be afraid – take heart'.

And then we have the story within the story within the story. Peter gets out of the boat and begins his walk of faith, feels the wind, sees the waves and begins to sink. He, we, doubt Jesus and begin to panic. We set out to do what we believe God is calling us to do – 'come' – panic and begin to sink, sink because of fear or doubt, or because we simply want to get out, because it is too difficult, too challenging. 'You of little faith; why did you doubt?' But just as God did not abandon Elijah, Jesus does not abandon Peter, nor us. Even a little faith can take us a long way, and certainly back into the boat, into the security of a faith community which understands

only too well the fears and doubts, because we have all been there! Did the other disciples laugh at Peter, or throw him overboard – of course not. Their minds and hearts were fixed on Jesus.

I set out to write a sermon about prayer, about the need to find a mountain or a cave, a quiet space to simply sit and be, to listen to that sheer silence – to give God not your shopping list but your attention – but I seem to have ended up writing about reassurance, hope and commission. That's the annoying thing about the Holy Spirit – she sometimes takes you off to a place you had no intention of going (commission!). I even looked out a very special poem about silence and prayer, which I had intended to share with you. I'll have to save it for another time.

Christine