

The story of Elijah's flight to Mount Horeb is intriguing and complex.

The main narrative tells of how Elijah, having battled with false prophets fled for his life after he was threatened by Jezebel. Having fled a little way he is overcome with despair and asks God to take his life. But instead God sends his angels to encourage Elijah to eat and continue his flight as far as Mount Horeb. God is waiting for him there and asks Elijah why he has fled. Elijah is indignant saying he has put his life on the line for God. God accepts Elijah's 'resignation' as prophet and asks him to anoint Elisha in his place.

But in between the indignation of Elijah and the acceptance of his resignation, a second narrative interrupts the first.

God tells Elijah to wait on the mountain top because the presence of God is about to pass by and Elijah dutifully does so. First a mighty wind passes by but God is not in the wind. Then there is an earthquake but God is not in the earthquake. Then comes a mighty fire but God is not in the fire. Finally Elijah hears a gentle whisper. It is the voice of God. And God whispers the same question he asked before, asking Elijah why he was there. Elijah gives the same answer of self-justification and it is only now that God releases him from his duties, telling him to anoint Elisha in his place.

What do these two narratives tell us about how we encounter God?

The first narrative is about being transformed in our encounters with God. Elijah battles with the false prophets, flees for his life, becomes suicidal and then becomes angry with God. He goes through an emotional roller coaster before he finally ends up with the awareness that this feeling that he has had that God relies on him (Elijah) and on him alone is an illusion that has done him great harm. God, of course, can use whom he chooses for his purposes and will use somebody else (Elisha, for example) if Elijah can do no more. Elijah finds peace only when he accepts his own limitations and understands that God is not dependent on him.

The second narrative tells us that the voice of God we long to hear is a whisper. We will find it in the calm and not in the storm. The storms of our lives may be the dramatic highlights but the periods of calm afterwards, the periods of reflection, these are the periods of spiritual development; the times when we will make progress.

The story of Elijah on Mount Horeb has great healing power. For example, many older clergy in the Church of England look back on many years of hard work in churches that have declined in size and strength during their ministry. This engenders powerful emotions that must be acknowledged before God so that the value of passing the baton onto the next generation (Elisha, in this story) can be properly appreciated in the comparative stillness of retirement.

But this story is not just for vicars. We all need to be transformed by experiencing the presence of God in the form of the Holy Spirit.

So where are you in the story? Are you living in a period of storm or a period of silence?

If this is a period of storm for you; hang on. The silence will come afterwards.

And if this is a period of silence, listen for the gentle whisper of God. This is the time when he will tell you what you need to know. His Spirit will rest upon you.

Diarmaid MacCulloch, famous for his BBC documentary series, *A History of Christianity*, has written a very lovely book called *Silence: A Christian History*. I am indebted to this book for an intriguing little fact about the Order of Mount Carmel, the Carmelite friars who emerged from Palestine in the thirteenth century. The Carmelites claimed to trace their origins back to Elijah. As unlikely as this origin story was, they kept to it stubbornly, so that their spirituality remained rooted in the encounter that Elijah had with God on the mountain top and in this way the spiritual depth of this story finds its place in the richness of our faith tradition.

As it does, of course, in the poem of Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier which I have plagiarised for our finishing prayer for those quiet moments we have sought out after the storms have passed.

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
forgive our foolish ways;
re clothe us in our rightful mind,
in purer lives thy service find,
in deeper reverence, praise.

Breathe through the heats of our desire
thy coolness and thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm.

Amen.