



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

9 August 2020: Matins Sermon

The Ninth Sunday after Trinity

1 Kings 19:9–18

The Venerable Jonathan Chaffey, The Archdeacon of Oxford

“There Elijah went into a cave and spent the night.” 1 Kings 19.9

Elijah arrived at Mt Horeb (which was probably another name for Mt Sinai) physically exhausted, emotionally wrung-out and spiritually desolate. Despite his remarkable triumph at Mt Carmel over the prophets of Baal, he had run for his life, fearful of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. It is fair to say that he was also running from God and perhaps from his true self; and so his physical resting in a cave can be seen as reflecting an internal state of considerable depression and despair.

How extraordinary it is that a man regarded as one of the greatest prophets, revered in each of the monotheistic religions, could be in this position. Some of the crowd following Jesus even thought he might be Elijah, who was expected as the forerunner of the Messiah. Jesus himself placed Elijah on a high pedestal, saying of John the Baptist: *“If you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come”*. Then at a pivotal moment in Jesus’ ministry, on the Mt of Transfiguration Elijah appeared miraculously alongside Moses, embodying Jesus’ fulfilment of both law and prophecy. It follows that when we study the stories of Elijah we are clearly considering a prophet of enormous distinction. Yet here he was, fearful and feeling very alone, curled up in a dark place.

We can probably all identify to some extent with Elijah’s position. Whether extrovert or introvert, prone to fight or flight, it is very common to allow external circumstances to undermine our inner sense of identity, to challenge our integrity of body and soul. *“Events, dear boy, events”* was famously attributed to Prime Minister Harold Macmillan as he described what could most affect the course of a government. It may be that events have knocked our self-worth, leading to the removal of our status in the work-place or the community, seemingly taking away a key component of our purpose in life. In my time as a military chaplain I have known Service personnel (even chaplains) really struggle with the humdrum of normal life following the heightened awareness of operational service. I visited a young airman at home just weeks after his

return from Iraq; he was clearly missing the close camaraderie of his mates, still wearing his desert boots in his sitting room. Any significant change or transition can focus a spotlight on our core identity. So with relationships, physical bereavement or the dislocation of divorce can sap our energy, leaving us desolate and broken inside. Nor is this just a private, personal matter. Many observers have noted through this current pandemic that the imposed restrictions on working and social life have brought unwanted complications in terms of socio-economic life but also raised more existential questions concerning what we most cherish and what we stand for, both individually and as wider communities. I have found it reassuring recently to hear our Bishops speak openly about their own struggles, expressing a range of sentiments from confusion to being 'zoomed out', but also more generally with Archbishop Justin describing with honesty his personal battles with mental health. So indeed, events, relationships, internal struggles can sometimes be enough to get anyone down, even a prophet like Elijah who walked in close tandem with God.

Elijah's story resonates down the ages because it describes a common human condition and yet also the powerful yet gentle response of God. In reading Elijah's encounter with God at Horeb it is important to note that God was not absent; Elijah had lost the energy to engage, instead simply turning in on himself. And when we have nowhere else to run, we find that God does reveal his presence, which is of fundamental importance to our wellbeing. He also offers practical support and restoration. He had already arranged for Elijah to be physically fed on his journey from Samaria to Sinai. It's important to take this seriously. We do not always need a counsellor but sometimes simply a holiday or some practical advice. We also need places of refuge, whether a church building, a room to ourselves, a particular walk that we enjoy. Horeb was, of course, a spiritual home for the true people of Israel, the holy mountain where Moses had received the 10 Commandments. How might you organise your diary to give space for physical recreation? Where also might you go, to have space for reflection, to know the presence of God?

The Lord then moved on to Elijah's emotional, spiritual and relational needs, addressing him by name: "*What are you doing here, Elijah?*" To be known, loved and valued by name is a beautiful gift. One senior military commander thanked me for using his first name, the only person who did so in the heat of operations. Wise counsellors also know how to listen. Elijah had prepared a speech, the one he had been rehearsing on the journey south, all about the spiritual state of the nation and his own isolation. God did not answer his question directly but gave him an instruction, to step outside of his cave. Timing, of course, is everything and God knew when Elijah was ready to receive him. I wonder if you can recall times in your life when God revealed himself in a fresh way, perhaps through a verse of scripture, a word in season from a friend, or just a deep down awareness of his reassuring presence.

What followed for Elijah was a beautiful encounter, a 'gentle whisper' of God. Sometimes the Holy Spirit comes in quite a dramatic manner but he often speaks in very quiet ways, just as Jesus 'breathed' the Holy Spirit on his disciples in the Upper Room after his Resurrection. Alongside encounter came restoration, as it did for those disciples. For Elijah this meant relational reassurance with God informing him that there were 7000 others who had not bowed the knee to Baal. He was also given fresh vocational instructions, to appoint a new King, Jehu, and a new prophet, his successor, Elisha. It would not be an easy ride, for Elijah still needed courage yet again to face down Ahab and Jezebel. He probably still needed to face his own internal challenges; they don't easily go away. But he did know that God was with him and had anointed him for specific tasks.

The whole story of Elijah's ministry during a particular period in Israel's history around the middle of the ninth century BC is remarkably vivid and speaks to us across the generations. It's a series of ripping yarns. I lived for a while on Mount Carmel and can easily visualise the story of his encounter with Jezebel's prophets and his flight down to the Sinai. Of greater significance was the privilege my wife enjoyed in celebrating the Eucharist on top of Mt Horeb. That central act in our corporate worship is a reminder that God is present in all the '*changes and chances of this mortal life*', as described in the Book of Common Prayer, so that we may be refreshed and restored through his eternal changelessness.

So let us pause and bring to God our own joys and the sorrows and the hopes and the fears of the communities in which we live and serve:

*Be present, O merciful God,
and protect us through the hours of this night,
so that we who are wearied
by the changes and chances of this mortal life
may rest in your eternal changelessness;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*