

1 Kings 19:9. What are you doing here, Elijah?

What are you doing here, Elijah? What are **you** doing here? Elijah had heard the words so often before. "Oh, no. It's you is it?" "Not again, surely". He was so much of a pest that the King had a special nickname for him. He used to ask "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" The nearest to Elijah I've ever met was George MacLeod, the most magnificent, intimidating and controversial Church of Scotland minister of my lifetime. I'm going to read to you the beginning of the sermon preached at George MacLeod's funeral by his biographer, Ron Ferguson; as you hear these words you will hear exactly the impression that Elijah made on the ancient Israelites. He began *George MacLeod was what my aunty from Cowdenbeath would have called "an awfy man". And "awfy" could be awfy awfy. He could be stubborn, imperious, insensitive, ruthless and manipulative. But George was "awfy" in the other sense too: awful and inspiring.*

He was a warrior for God, on fire with zeal for the Lord God of Hosts. The Queen, Jezebel, could not stand the sight of him: she was for ever screaming "What are **you** doing here?" The new religion she had brought with her, the worship of Baal, was flourishing. Sometimes it seemed that nothing could stand in its way. Except one man. One man faithful to the Lord God of Israel. But that one man was Elijah: and Elijah was mighty. Every single time it looked as though the old faith was being swept away, there he was, fierce and immovable. The queen's husband roared in frustration "Is it you, you troubler of Israel? What are you doing here?"

But the day came when his power failed. The day when Jezebel's threats were too much for him. The day when the cost of his unremitting struggle, the cost to Elijah's body and his mind and his spirit, the cost had to be paid. The story we read this morning tells of his terror and his despair as he flees as far away as he can. Suddenly he is at the end of his tether. The story tells of all the classic signs of depressive illness: fatigued, sleeping a great deal, his view of reality is distorted, he's not eating, endless complaining, thoughts of suicide. In his terror and depression and despair, in his complete collapse, he reaches the mountain of the Lord. And what does God say to him? *What are you doing here, Elijah?*

But this time the question is not asked in anger and frustration. This time it is a question asked in tenderness. What are you doing here, my dear one? You, of all people, to be found in this state? You who have been so valiant for me and my cause? who have fought so heroically for so long? What are you doing here like this, Elijah? There is no divine rebuke for his breakdown. God sees him, sees him in all his weakness, and accepts him as he is. As, in our moments of greatest weakness, God always does.

The story moves from *What are **you** doing here, Elijah?* to *What are you doing **here**, Elijah?* Here, at Mount Horeb? On the Holy Mountain? We know Horeb better by its other name: this is Mount Sinai. Elijah has crawled his way for forty days and forty nights through the desert's blazing sun to reach the Holy Mountain, the Mountain of God. This is Mount Sinai, where Moses met God face to face. This is Mount Sinai, where God proclaimed his covenant with his people whom he had delivered from slavery by giving them their rule, the way of life which marked them as God's special people, the Ten Commandments. For the people of the Hebrew Bible it was at this mountain that the high and holy God had chosen them and loved them as his special people. And in his hour of desperate need it is to this mountain that Elijah has come.

Are there special places where you can meet God, feel God more near, sense the holiness? That used to be a very popular idea, but the Protestant Reformers did not like it: partly because they believed that every place was the right place to meet God, and partly because they saw the exploitation of the credulous pilgrims by the greedy keepers of the pilgrim sites. But in our day there has been a resurgence of interest. There are always crowds at the ancient sites around the Sea of Galilee; the pilgrimage to Compostella – the Camino de Santiago – attracts hundreds of thousand every year. At the moment it looks as if my little hope of a Morningside journey to Iona may not take place because of major refurbishments to the Abbey: but if and when it does happen I have no doubt that for nearly everyone there will be an element of pilgrimage in that journey.

So the General Assembly this year gave its blessing to the concept of pilgrimage to holy places. Rev. Richard Frazer, Convener of the Church and Society Council, said *In a time when the Church is looking for new ways to touch the hearts of all people, pilgrimage is a very powerful tool. It is on the journey that we meet others and find Christ in the stranger.*

For forty days and forty nights Elijah journeyed, on and on. Journeyed to the Holy Mountain. In his blackest hour he went on, seeking, hoping. Pressing on the Horeb, where God had met Moses: Horeb, where God had bound his people to himself. He needed help. That is why he was there.

The story moves from *What are **you** doing here, Elijah?* to *What are you doing **here**, Elijah?* and moves again to *What are you **doing** here, Elijah?* So Elijah tells God that he is beaten. *I've done my very best for the God of my fathers. I've stood up against the prophets of Baal, the false prophets, with every ounce of energy I have, with every drop of faith I have. But now they are out to get me and I can't cope.* So God tells him to go and stand at the mouth of the cave and watch. Watch and listen.

And the fireworks begin. It's one of the most dramatic passages in the whole Bible. *Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire*

The words many people remember at that point of the story are *after the fire a still small voice* – just as in the hymn we sang earlier

*Breathe through the earthquake, wind and fire*

*O still small voice of calm*

But that is not a correct translation. What the Bible actually says is *after the fire a sound of sheer silence.*

It is that sheer silence, that silence which comes after a great storm, after a firework display, after a tremendous piece of music, that Elijah encounters God.

Do you remember Simon and Garfunkel?

*And the vision that was planted in my brain*

*Still remains*

*Within the sound of silence*

Somehow, in that sheer silence, Elijah is in the presence of utter holiness. In his weakness and sense of complete failure, God has come to meet him. God has accepted him and called him back to his great task

Elijah the Tishbite, in the great crisis of his life, listened for the voice of God. The voice of God came to him in the cave, not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but in the sound of sheer silence. And then there came a voice. And what the still small voice of God said to Elijah was "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel". "But Ahab is the King of Israel!" "Exactly!"

What God said to Elijah in the still small voice was, "Go and start a revolution"