

I Kings 19:1-15

In the early 1930s a team of archaeologists excavated an isolated hill twenty miles north of Jerusalem. They found what they had gone looking for; they found the ruins of a three thousand year old palace. The hill was Samaria and this was the palace built by Omri, the soldier king of Israel. Then the archaeologists found something else, they found ivory. With every step they walked on flakes of ivory, their trowels turned up ivory carvings. Too sophisticated for the hill farmers of Israel, this ivory was Phoenician and it told a story

Omri died in 869 B.C. and was succeeded by his son, Ahab. Ahab was another soldier, good at that, but nonetheless, one of the most infamous kings Israel ever had:

Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him.

He took a wife, a princess from Phoenicia called Jezebel. It was Jezebel who brought the artists to decorate the palace on the hill. Those archaeologists in the 1930s were walking in the ivory halls where fragrant, deadly Jezebel once walked.

It was part of the story of Ahab and Jezebel that we heard in our reading about Elijah. The problem was that Ahab was also an apostate, he did not serve the Lord; instead he worshipped Jezebel's Phoenician God: Baal.

If you have heard any of the story told in the First book of Kings you may remember that there was a showdown, on Mount Carmel, where Elijah, took on the prophets of Baal and called down fire from heaven. Elijah won that contest and killed some of his opponents, but he was still outnumbered and feared for his life. As we picked up the story, this morning, Elijah had fled south, beyond the reach of Ahab and Jezebel. He sat under a broom tree and despaired. *O LORD, take away my life.* An angel came to him and sent him on to Horeb, the mount of God. At Horeb the Lord himself appeared to him.

It is a great story but you can miss what is going on here if you are not careful. First of all you need to know that Horeb is another name for Sinai; so Elijah has arrived at the mountain where Moses once saw the Lord pass by. In that story Moses hid in a cleft in the rock just before God revealed himself and now Elijah hides in a cave. It is quite deliberate, the story of Elijah is meant to sound very like the story of Moses. We are learning something about God.

At Horeb the word of the Lord comes to Elijah and he is told to leave his cave and to go and stand on the mountain because the Lord is *about to pass by*. It is a fairly well known passage

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

Now then, in the Authorised Version, the text continues

And after the earthquake a fire; *but* the LORD was not in the fire:
and after the fire a still small voice I Kings 19:12

A still small voice; that is a memorable phrase and too good to waste. So, in the hymn Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, we sing,

Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire, O still, small voice of calm.

Lovely, really lovely and really wrong. The story of what Elijah heard and saw has become a story about a God with good manners, a God you can bring to tea who will speak gently and not frighten the cat.

It is not what the story is about; it is not what the story says. What happened on Horeb was not just a bit of theatre, wind machines and lightning flashes and then a gentle God. This was a different theology altogether. The references are specific. The false God, Baal was a god the weather, a god of wind. If the wind was blowing a gale, you thought Baal was about. So, when we hear that the Lord was not in the wind we are being told very clearly that the Lord is not like Baal. I Kings goes to some trouble to tell us that God is not a nature God, the sort of God they worshipped in Phoenicia, not a God of special effects, or earthquakes. Instead, God appears before Elijah and there is not still small voice. Instead, as we heard this morning,

after the fire a sound of sheer silence I Kings 19:12

A sound of sheer silence. That is a tricky idea. There is a Eucharistic prayer we do not use very often in the cathedral because I pull faces when I hear it. It is prayer G. It says, 'all your works echo the silent music of your praise'. I cannot

make sense of that. What is *silent music* when it is at home and how does it *echo*? A sound of sheer silence is a real challenge, and it is meant to be. God is not like the gods, nothing like a God who conjures up wind or a God whose party trick is earthquakes. That is precisely the point that is being made here. Not that God is polite, and softly spoken, but that God is not like the gods who throw thunderbolts or turn into swans.

There is an important idea here and when we do not understand it we get into difficulties. The gods, that strange figure Baal who appears in statues holding a kind of mace posed to do some smiting; gods like that are gods who do things. On Thursday they make it rain, when they are upset they send lightning. And our God, the God of Elijah, the God we meet in Jesus Christ, is not like that. The sound of sheer silence. We really do have to get it into our heads that God does not do things.

God does not get restless and set off a volcano to keep things interesting. There is an Eddie Izzard monologue in which he describes creation,

*the second day [God] created fire and water and egnog and radiators
and lights and Burma*

It is very clever, but it depends on that idea that God is just the biggest version you can possibly imagine of someone who does tricks and make decisions. Too often we think God is the absolutely ultimate boss the person who fixes things. We have God rushing in and out his own creation moving the pieces, curing this person of gout, smiting the Philistines, providing a parking space in Clifton when we have popped out to buy a paper. That is Baal I am afraid and really not *the sound of sheer silence*.

God, says, John the evangelist, in the bible, is love. God is love and God is nothing else. God is love, God is not cross sometimes, righteously indignant in the mornings and merciful at tea time. God is love, unchanging, eternal love. There is nothing God is about to do, no yesterday, no 'after this'. God has no agenda, no work in progress, no decisions to make, nothing that he might do.

From the beginning and forever God loved creation into being and loves in it and through it. You cannot put on your spectacles and set creation over here and God over there and see how they are different. All things exist in him and for him.

Now that is perhaps enough doctrine for one morning though it is just the point that story on I Kings was trying to make. There is though one question I

still have to answer. If I am right and God really does not change his mind or make decisions. What on earth are we doing when we pray, why do we ask for things? What will Margaret be doing, in a moment, when she begins the intercessions? The problem we have here is that we get a bit distracted by Margaret. Now let's be clear that is really not her fault, she is not doing anything wrong, actually Margaret is rather good at intercessions. The problem is to do with us and our determination to think about who is doing things. We like people to be in charge, we want God to be the boss; we like to notice that Margaret is *doing* the interceding. So we notice Margaret and then we think we join in what she is doing. But, we have missed something. All of creation, remember, is in God and for God; everything happens within God's love. So, in the intercessions it is not Margaret praying and us joining in, it is God praying and *Margaret* joining in. Prayer is the place where we go to connect with that constant loving purpose that is God. If you like it is a bit like launching a little boat into a mighty river. To begin with you are not sure which way the current goes, not sure even which way you want to go. So prayer always starts with us being honest and asking for what we want. Looking at the challenges we see and then little by little we look for the love of God at work.

That is not easy. Listening for that sound of sheer silence is really hard. We prefer the bells and whistles, the wind and the earthquake, we get that. Our problem as T S Eliot once explained is that we have the experience, but miss the meaning. The shootings in Orlando, the Referendum, IS, football hooligans, Jo Cox, we hear the clamour; can we, can we really see beyond, listen through these things and know that there is constant loving purpose? We are put to the test at the moment. The news is bad. We are surrounded by the horror and noise of terror. The men and women of terror want us to be distracted, they want us to pay attention to the noise and the drama. They want us to live in fear and give up on our commitment to hope, give up on our belief in love. Prayer is an exercise in love, so is faith, so is life itself. We must not be distracted. God is a God of love. At the heart of creation there is love. We must not give way to fear, we must not be seduced into thinking that it is more action that it is needed, more noise and fury. We will not be saved by anything we do, our calling is just to receive and return the love that is the beginning and end of everything.