

Reflective Worship – 2nd June – The presence of the Spirit

Mark 9:2-8

Acts 1:4-11

I want to start this evening by thinking about the prophet Elijah – one of the great characters of the Old Testament – seen in our first reading in glory in the presence of Jesus and Moses on the mountain top.

There's a story about when he challenged and defeated the prophets of the false God Baal, and how in doing so he brought an end to the drought. It was arguably the highest point in his ministry. He has in a spectacular fashion proved the power of God and the truth of the message he has been preaching. But, soon afterwards, the great prophet thinks he is the only one left who believes in God. The queen Jezebel wanted him dead, all seemed to be against him. So he turned to God and said he had had enough and that he didn't want to carry on. And he was led to the Holy mountain and was told to wait as God would come to him there.

He hid in a cave and there was a mighty wind, but God was not in the wind. Then there was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake; then there was a mighty fire, but God was not in the fire. Eventually Elijah found that God was in a silent whisper, a barely audible sound but in fact the word of the living God.

The wind, the earthquake and the fire were all ways in which God had revealed himself in the past. All ways in which at various times through history the people had encountered God. But on that day, on that mountain, to Elijah - God chose to reveal himself in a much less dramatic way. The still small voice, or the gentle whisper, or even as some translations would have it the sound of sheer silence.

And I guess for us in our Christian lives we are often seeking after God. Perhaps we are like Elijah, heading off to a place where we have found God before, perhaps a church building, maybe a special room at home, possibly on a particular hill or the beach, perhaps outside (like this evening). Or we look for God to appear in ways he has been there for us in the past. In the familiar words of the prayer book, a poem, a hymn or some music. A candle, an icon or some incense.

And there's nothing wrong with any of those things. For me, the abbey church on the island of Iona is a special place, a particular piece of music by Pink Floyd often brings me into God's presence. The hills of the Eden valley in Cumbria, or the sights, sounds and smells of the islands off the West coast of Scotland frequently do it for me. Or sitting in silence in a great medieval cathedral. But not always.

Sometimes I do everything 'right' and it seems that God isn't there. Just like Elijah on the Holy Mountain. I don't find God in the wind or the earthquake or the fire. Though he should be there! Sometimes he surprises me by being in a gentle whisper, in the silence, but not always. Sometimes there is nothing. The silence is simply silence, emptiness, nothing. And maybe it's the same for you.

And this searching for God has been part of the human experience for all time. Sometimes with success, sometimes not – and there seems to be no logical reason why sometimes we find him and sometimes we don't.

It was the case for Elijah, and it still seems to be the case for us.

But something has changed from Elijah's day. Elijah lived before the incarnation, before the time of Jesus.

In Jesus God came to live amongst us as a human being. The word became flesh. God with us. Emmanuel. It became possible to meet with God in just the same way as it's possible for you and me to meet and talk.

Jesus said- **if you have seen me you have seen the father.** And **I and the father are one.**

Imagine for a moment being one of those first disciples. They were in the privileged position of being able to walk and talk and be with Jesus - with God - on a daily basis. Imagine that. And they had two or three years of this. Alongside him. Listening to his voice, following his example; sharing his ideals and motivations. Aware of God's presence with them day by day. In the wind and fire, but also in the gentle whisper.

And then it all seemed to go wrong. The opposition; the plot; the arrest; the sham trial and the crucifixion. The disciples were bereft, and hid themselves away, not

knowing what to do. Having been so close to God in Jesus, they could barely contemplate life being so far away from him.

Then there was the mystery of the resurrection appearances. Once more he was there, once more they were encouraged and inspired. Once more ... but not for long

Because he left them. We were thinking on Thursday about the ascension. Jesus returning to God's space. But also Jesus promising that he would not leave his followers alone. The Holy Spirit, the comforter, the helper. The spirit of truth would come upon them.

The thing that always surprises me and stands out for me is the transformation of the disciples. From those who, when Jesus had died, couldn't even contemplate a future, those who either locked themselves away or went back to their old ways of fishing, to men and women who stood up boldly and proclaimed the gospel message to huge crowds and to small groups of individuals; Who stood up to religious leaders and Roman authorities; who risked and accepted suffering and even death;

It mirrored the change from being ordinary fishermen to being fishers of men; when they first met Jesus.

The first change was the change brought about by the presence of Jesus, This second change was brought about by the presence of the Spirit of Jesus – the Holy Spirit. God's ongoing presence with them day by day. The spirit of Jesus living in them; in all that they did. Once more they were living in the presence of God. Once more they could listen and know what God was saying; once more they could experience and see him at work – but this time in their own lives rather than the life of Jesus. They recognized the voice of Jesus that they knew so well in the promptings and the leading of the Spirit.

And this Holy Spirit was promised not just to those first followers; not just to the early disciples; not only to special Christians or church leaders but to all of us who put our trust in him. All of us down the years and the centuries. To you and to me.

The message of Pentecost – not just to hear but to live and experience – is that the Spirit of God; the Spirit of Jesus can live in us and be with us every day. We can live each day in God's presence. We no longer have to search for God in the familiar or the unusual places, because he is living in us. We have his strength and power and love with us day by day. No wonder it changed the disciples from fear to boldness. The question is how does or how can this promise change us?

There will of course still be times when we feel a long way from God; even when we supposedly have his Spirit within us, we can't seem to find him anywhere. When we go to the familiar places - the cathedral, the mountain or the beach -, when we listen to the familiar music, when we read the familiar words, when we encounter the wind, the earthquake and the fire but we cannot find ourselves in God's presence. When we pray, when we plead, when we shout and when we scream, but we cannot hear God, cannot see God, and we even doubt his existence. When if there is a gentle whisper it's so silent that it's inaudible. When we cannot recognize his presence at all.

And in those situations what can we do? How can we keep going? Is it possible to discover God again?

First remember that we are not the only person going through this. The kind of experience is not unusual. Spiritual lives are full of highs and lows. Immediately after that wonderful experience on the mountain, when they saw Jesus transfigured in glory with Moses and Elijah, the disciples did not have faith enough to minister to the sick young boy.

To benefit from the highs, we need to have experienced the lows. And maybe it's the recollection of the highs, the times when we have experienced God's presence, when we have been conscious of the love and presence of God through his spirit that gets us through the lows.

Second we have to see that to doubt is not the same as to not believe. In life we grow in knowledge through asking questions, and in our spiritual lives we grow in faith through asking questions, through expressing and acknowledging our doubts and uncertainties. The important thing is not to hide, not to pretend. Admit to God and to each other that we are finding things difficult. Share our frustrations, find someone to pray with. Elijah's problem was that he was alone - there was no-

one he could turn to. That's not the case for us. We belong to a church, we are one with other Christians.

And lastly remember Gods promises. Jesus said that he would not leave us alone; that he would send the spirit and would be always with us in the person of the spirit. At times all we can do is fall back on those promises. Say something like – this promise is not what I am currently experiencing, but I know it to be true.

Like in those famous words found in the Auschwitz concentration camp –

*I believe in the sun
even when it is not shining
And I believe in love,
even when there's no one there.
And I believe in God,
even when he is silent.*

At times like that all we can do is continue in prayer, continue searching for God, not basing our conclusions on current experience but on the promise and on our own experiences in the past. This is what those first disciples had to do after the Ascension. They were told to wait. They were told to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to come. They could have given up; they could have become dispirited and despairing. But they didn't. We read that they spent those days praying and praising God, trusting in the promise of Jesus that he would send his Spirit, which he did.

The promise of Pentecost – of the presence of the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Jesus - is a great promise to hold on to. The promise that God will be present with us in all that we do and all that we are - in our highs and in our lows. For all time.