

Sermon for Quinquagesima, Sunday next before Lent, 11th February 2018

1 Kings 19:1-16; 2 Peter 1:16-21 - a Still Small Voice

We pray, somewhat vaguely, I'm afraid, for Christians who are being persecuted for their faith. And we listen to the pronouncements of religious leaders like the Archbishop of Canterbury or his counterpart, Archbishop John in York, without necessarily changing our outlook as a result.

I won't labour those points - I'm sure you will prove me wrong in particular instances, and that some of you have been definitely involved in supporting persecuted Christians, and others have taken to heart Archbishop Justin's call for new ways of providing finance for poor people, to replace the payday loan companies.

But my point is that, if we read about Elijah, on the run from Queen Jezebel after he had slain the 400 prophets of Baal 'with the sword', and after she had sworn to do to him what he had done to the prophets, to spifflicate them utterly; and if we read the Second Letter of St Peter, which reads effectively like a 'hellfire and damnation' sermon, are we really very much affected? Do we immediately link the prophet Elijah, on the run from Jezebel, with, say, the Coptic Christians in Egypt and Syria? Or do we think about what it might mean to be a prophet today, as the writer of 2 Peter thought he was being? 'We have ... a more sure word of prophecy', he wrote.

You will have noticed that I didn't say 'St Peter' wrote a hellfire and damnation sermon. That's a bit of a snag. Because most scholars agree that 2 Peter wasn't written by St Peter. It looks to have been written pretty late, possibly in the second century, well after St Peter had died.

So what are we to make of it, when it says, pretending to be St Peter, '[We] .. were eyewitnesses of his majesty', and they were with him at the Transfiguration up on the mountain with Moses and Elijah, and they heard the voice of God say, about Jesus, 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'? If it's not St Peter talking - or rather, writing - doesn't it rather lose impact?

In these latest times, when we are covered with stories of 'fake news' and apparently respectable politicians saying that we 'should not trust experts', where do prophets come in, and stories of revelation - God speaking to Elijah, after a hurricane and an earthquake, in 'a still small voice', and appearing to Jesus and some of the disciples - albeit probably not to the writer of the Second Letter of Peter - as a disembodied voice, identifying Jesus as being divine as well as human? Where do these stories fit in? Are they just that,

stories, or are they something more serious? We can perhaps overlook the real authorship of 2 Peter, because of course the story of the Transfiguration appears also in the Gospels. This morning we had the version in St Mark [9:2-9].

I suppose one can't deny that a lot of the Bible has rather lost its power to rule our lives. If you look at the Jewish Law, the first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch - take the Ten Commandments as its basic heart - do we abide by them, all of them, literally? Well, you're doing pretty well if you do. And what about Jesus' commandments? What if 'love your neighbour' meant giving up half your garden for a council house to be built there? That was a dilemma canvassed at the Deanery Synod this week.

But if you read on beyond our passage in 2 Peter, the people who don't obey God's Commandments, either those from Elijah and Moses' time or the more modern versions, those faithless people will be condemned eternally. Rather colourfully the Bible says about the unbelievers, 'It is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire'.

Just as I don't see an easy way of persuading a lot of people that their support for Brexit is a massive mistake - perhaps because they believe that there is an alternative set of facts which would lead to wonderful opportunities - so I'm not very optimistic that we would even recognise a prophet today, let alone follow their prophecies. There's a problem, overshadowing all the other issues, which is, as Pontius Pilate said, 'What is truth?'

The trouble is, that a lot of the biggest issues today involve looking into the future. It would really help if some of us could go up on that mountain, and get a fresh word from God.

But in another sense, this is a good time to look again, to reflect, and see if we can in fact hear that 'still, small voice'. Wednesday will be Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent: 'Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return', the minister will say, Godfrey here at 10.30 in the morning and Peter Vickers at St Andrew's at 8 in the evening.

It begins that period of reflection leading up to the tumultuous events of Holy Week and Easter. Easter, the death and resurrection of Jesus, defines us as Christians. Some people use the symbol of the cross to stand for the meaning of Easter. I personally find it rather difficult to see beyond the cross' awful function as a means of cruel killing. I know that Jesus' glorious resurrection could not have happened unless he were dead - and so to that extent one can say that the cross was an essential part of Easter - just as it was essential that Judas Iscariot was a disciple. The good things could not have

happened without there having been bad things beforehand. But I still find it difficult to like the cross.

The idea at Lent is for us to take time to reflect, to take ourselves away from our busy daily routines, to listen for that 'still, small voice' calling us; calling us to change our lives, to get closer to God - which is what the call to repent of our sins really means.

It sounds good: but how many people will really do something life-changing in Lent? I started out being rather pessimistic. Does anyone today really care if God spoke to Elijah? Was Jesus really 'transfigured' with Moses and Elijah on a mountain top, and did a divine voice say that Jesus was his son?

I think that, if it remains just something you read about, Lent won't be likely to bring you closer to God, and you may well not hear a still small voice. But if you do something, preferably with other Christian believers, I think there's a much better chance.

I think it's like the relationship between going to church and the strength of one's faith. Going to church is like keeping a log burning. If it's in a proper fireplace, with other logs burning alongside it, it's likely to burn brighter and longer than if you just stuck it on the pavement by itself and lit it. You are the log, the fireplace is our church, and being left to burn by oneself on the pavement is like being 'spiritual but not religious'.

That's why we often have Lent study groups - as we are doing again this year. It's not too late to sign up - the sheet is at the back - and it looks as though there will be groups during the day and in the evening every weekday from 19th February, Monday week, for five weeks, exploring the idea of being 'Better Together' - which is not meant to be anything to do with the Brexit business, but rather with our various relationships, with our families, our churches, with strangers, with people with whom our relationship has broken down, and finally, our relationship with God. Talk to me after the service if you want to know more.

Or, another thing you could do is to follow the Bishop of Guildford's Lent Challenge, which is a programme of things to do over the five weeks. It's more doable than giving something up, I think, as it gets you doing something different, in addition to your normal routine. You are encouraged to give as well. The gifts will be split half and half between the Bishop of Guildford's Foundation and the Anglican Church Tanzania Appeal. As some of you know, I'm the lay vice-chair of the BGF, the Bishop of Guildford's Foundation, so I do hope you consider supporting the Bishop's Lent Challenge. There are some really good little prospectuses for you to take on your way out. They explain what BGF does. It provides grants for social projects associated with

churches anywhere in Guildford Diocese - things like street angels, food banks (and BGF gave the start-up capital for our food bank), school breakfast clubs, drop-in centres for lonely or needy people, social support workers, holiday outings for poorer and more elderly people, and so on.

Now I'm a great believer in 'belong and then believe' as a way into the family of God. I think that if you do any of these Lent things, following the stages in the Bishop's Lent Challenge or going to some sessions in the Lent study course - which is being organised by Churches Together, so you'll meet people from the other churches as well - if you do get a bit involved, I would be very surprised if you don't find that your faith grows. You may indeed hear the 'still small voice' of God. You just have to try.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant