



Quiet Day - Parish of Brighton Saturday 28 February 2009

Wilderness Talk 3 - Going on from Horeb

"I am no better than my forebears", said the prophet (IKings 19.4)

Under the broom bush and in Horeb's cave, Elijah confronts his limitations. One of life's important spiritual tasks is to face what we are not, to face our limitations.

Despite his stunning achievements and victories, Elijah has been knocked off balance, and he sits lamenting that he is no better than those before.

Despite all his personal power, his influence had been limited. There were only 5000 who had not bowed to Baal.

*The spiritual challenge of the maturing years,
is to face what we are not,
and to come to grace about what we are...*

So strengthened by the Angel, Elijah journeys to Mount Horeb, or Sinai as it is also known.

I was there with the youth pilgrims just a few weeks ago. The terrain is harsh and sheer. It is almost treeless and the rock face rise almost vertically. We climbed it through the night, a demanding climb in freezing cold. There were caves and crannies such as the one in which Elijah sheltered.

And looking out from the summit at dawn, one could imagine the terror of an electrical storm, wind and the fire of lightening in that harsh environment.

What are you doing here Elijah (19.9)

The rationalizations, the self justifications pour out. He is the last of the faithful. He has been very zealous, when all others have fallen away, and “I only I am left” (19.10, 14).

Elijah’s words echo in many a workplace, home and parish. They come from the conviction that everything depends on us. Every parish has someone to echo Elijah, convinced that they alone can do this particular task, convinced all the others who have tried (or who would try if they were given the chance) have bowed the knee to Baal, or at least have let the side down in one way or another.

There are many times in life when we have to let go of control and accept influence, when we have to let go of power and embrace empowering, or when we simply have to accept the fact that we have had our turn and now it is up to others. And God reminds Elijah that there were 5000 others, even if he is disparaging of them!

In his cave encounter, beyond earthquake wind and fire, Elijah struggles with God, and finds him not in the manifestations of might, but in gentle stillness. Like the storm, the turmoil in the prophet too is stilled and once more he can go on. But not to do the things he did before.

He leaves Mt Horeb with a new task before him. He leaves the cave strong but very much changed and he will make a difference again, though in a different way.

Elijah has not surrendered his strength in his struggle, for God does not desire such servile surrender. But his protest of

“I only I”

has been left in the cave and God has told him that there are others. From this point on, his ministry will be about those others, making a way for others, challenging them and empowering them.

The great solitary prophet, the great troubler of Israel, who had faced kings and kingdoms standing alone, leaves the Mountain of God and begins to do something new.

This solitary great one begins to make the way for others to follow. He anoints a king as well as choosing his successor, throwing his mantle over Elisha.

He releases his work and his dreams into the hands of others.

And this is a greater spiritual victory, than his brief, but fiery triumph upon Mt Carmel, for this will last even beyond his own days.

St John wrote at the end of his Gospel: “When you were young you girded yourself and went where you would, but when you are older, someone else will gird you and take you where you do not want to go”¹

Youth defines itself over and against others.
Youth asserts its own power. It goes where it wills.

But then there comes a time when we know that this is not the appropriate way.

This is the lesson that Elijah learned,
as he struggled with God in that mountainous cave...
and in our world which so applauds independence and strength,
it is our deep spiritual challenge as well.

It was the choice that Jesus made as he began his journey to Jerusalem, the city of his destiny and his city of suffering.

In his choosing, he forsakes power and places himself in the power of others, he forsakes strength and embraces vulnerability,
he refuses fire from heaven and abandons himself to a Cross.

The choices of our journey are different only in scale:
To accept our limitations and come to grace about who we are.
To move from independence to interdependence, from power to empowerment, from strength to vulnerability.
This is the journey of Elijah.
The journey of Christ.
The human journey.

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¹ John 21.18