

A Still Small Voice

The Bible has given us a host of memorable phrases, and my title – from 1 Kings 19:12 (KJV) – must be amongst some of the best known from the Old Testament. Well known maybe, but I've been pondering that it might have been a breakthrough moment in human understanding of the divine which we have inherited. The familiar words are from a familiar story. After the showdown with the prophets of Ba'al on mount Carmel, Elijah flees from Jezebel's wrath and Ahab's power – latter day examples of powerful people who don't know when or how to stop i.e. it's our same old world of Putin & Trump etc. And there in the mouth of the cave, which had become his refuge, God reveals God's own self – not in wind, earthquake or fire but in that 'O still small voice of calm', as Whittier's hymn much later takes it up.

In fact the original Hebrew words are highly elusive with regard to their precise meaning, and various bible translations come up with different suggestions. But what is clear is that God's way of communicating with Elijah undermines the then culturally familiar understandings of how God reveals God's own self in the great storm or volcanic eruption. Thus, the elusive phrase which is our focus, is in deliberate and marked contrast with how God's original epiphany on this same mountain is portrayed in Exodus 19:16-18, where 'thunder and lightning...thick cloud...blast of a trumpet so loud that all...trembled...smoke went up..while the whole mountain shook violently...'etc. Such imagery was widespread in surrounding ancient cultures describing their storm gods which matched their everyday experience of life as threatening; a chaos they had little chance of controlling. Ba'al was one such god.

But here within Elijah's consciousness, God became present in the still small voice, the sound of sheer silence, a gentle breeze, a voice of a light whisper; to use some of those phrases used to translate this elusive Hebrew phrase. What has this to do with what we're about in our stilling prayer group? Everything!!

If God is to be found and experienced as graciously present in our own personal lives, we must practice finding God quietly within ourselves, especially when the storm or turbulence of circumstances erupt. Of course we're chiefly affected by such eruptions within our immediate circles of family and friends. But more broadly such eruptions in wider society also impact us, and it seems these are happening with increasing frequency. For instance, I have to deliberately turn from the darkness, anxiety and even anger such eruptions generate within me to find God again in the stillness. To be specific, in the last week or so, within days of Richard Tice, the deputy leader of *Reform*, denying climate breakdown and encouraging us all just to enjoy the summer warmth, we have thousands losing their lives in Nepal/Tibet from glacial melt and mountain collapse causing a massive deadly flood surge. I feel we're confronted by today's prophets of Baal! But like Elijah in his own fear, I need to come out from the cave of the darkness of my own emotional struggles, and move towards the light at the cave's mouth where God passes by, and hear again that 'still, small voice.' We have to practice quietening our spirits while turning towards the light – that is what these simple few minutes is about week by week: hearing God's still, small voice within. In famous words from Augustine's *Confessions*: 'Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you! Lo, you were within, but I was outside, seeking for you there.' Let's now turn within to the sound of sheer silence, a gentle breeze, a voice of a light whisper...the still small voice.

To lead into the silence

Breathe through the heats of our desire
thy coolness and thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm;
O still, small voice of calm.

To lead from the silence

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
forgive our foolish ways!
Re-clothe us in our rightful mind,
in purer lives thy service find,
in deeper reverence, praise;
in deeper reverence, praise.