

19th Sunday of Year A

Abbey Church 9 August 2020

In the end it is the still small voice which gets through to us, under our defences and sweeps away our prejudices and that's how it was for Elijah and can be for us, telling us something very important about God where he is to be found and where He is **not** to be found. The spectacular, perhaps the obvious, is not always the most important.

On the other hand this episode is very close to another of the Elijah stories – in fact just the chapter before – when Elijah has put on a show which can only be described as spectacular, when he challenges the prophets of Baal to see who can make the most impressive sacrifice to God – they are incapable of setting their altar alight, but Elijah after withering sarcasm about their efforts, pours water on the offerings, the altar and the trench around the altar and “the Lord's fire fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and licked up all the water in the trench” .

In the gospel too we also hear of the spectacular: Jesus walking on the water - Peter's attempt to join him - and the wind dropping leading to the disciples' declaration of faith.

If we try to apply the lesson of Elijah's vision to the gospel, it might appear that we should not be over-impressed by the walking on the water or the calming of the wind, but we should look for the still small voice. Where is it in this story? – or perhaps unfair to take any gospel incident in isolation - where in the gospel do we hear that still, small voice? It seems unlikely that God, having discovered such an effective means of communication, which proved more powerful than the roughest wind, the most crashing earthquake and the hottest fire should abandon it and go back to party tricks.

Look again at Jesus' first words to them: “Take heart, it is I; have no fear” Did he have to shout to make himself heard over the crashing of the waves and the blast of the wind? We don't know and perhaps even to ask the question shows that we are missing the point. Frequently in the OT the Lord says “Do not be afraid” and when that phrase is associated with the other part of what Jesus says, there is no ambiguity. It is only the Lord who says (for example, several times in Isaiah 43) “Fear not, I am with you” So the disciples take heart, not only because it is their friend Jesus who is saying that he is there with them and that he will protect them, but he is also saying that he speaks with the authority of God when he says this . . . as they acknowledge at the end of the episode: “Truly you are the Son of God” The story of Peter attempting to walk on the water himself is another layer to a story which is already revelatory about God being close to his people.

For most of us, for most of our lives, we will not be privileged to see great visions and wonders, but we can lead our lives in such a way that the still small voice of God manages to penetrate us and keep us safe from the raging waters. He may invite us to step out of the boat, to walk towards him, but he will also be with us when we lose confidence and fall or even when we can't get out of the boat at all.

On the feast day of St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross it seems appropriate to finish with a quotation from her, from *The Science of the Cross*:

The world we perceive with our senses is naturally the firm ground that carries us, the house where we feel at home, that feeds us, provides us with all our needs and is the source of our joys and pleasures. If it is taken away from us, or if we are compelled to withdraw from it, it is truly as if the ground were cut away from our feet and all around us were night, as if we ourselves had to drown and vanish.

Stein wrote in a letter that she often was asked to lecture on complicated topics, “but I always come down to my one topic: how important it is to learn to live at God's hands.”