

THE STILL, SMALL VOICE

Nicky Ing - 7th August 2005

1 Kings 19: 9-13; Psalm 106: 4-13; Romans 9: 1-5; Matthew 14: 22-33

Let's just consider part of the background to the Old Testament reading for a couple of minutes. The setting is in the northern kingdom of Israel, about 860 BC. At that time the kingdom was ruled by King Ahab, whose wife was Jezebel. Jezebel was a powerful woman and had an evil influence in Israel, especially in persuading people to turn away from the Lord and to worship false gods (this was known as Baal-worship). She was known to be ruthless and powerful, and would push aside anything and anyone who interfered with her plans. She had persuaded King Ahab to build pagan temples and she employed hundreds of false prophets who persuaded the people to worship idols.

Elijah, whom we find in the story this morning, was a prophet of God, who was chosen to confront the infidelity of the monarchy.....which he did, and one of the ways he did it was to challenge Jezebel's prophets to a public contest on the top of Mount Carmel. The king and a crowd of people watch this trial of strength.....No voice responds to the prayers of the false prophets, but when Elijah speaks, a fire appears and burns up his offering....and the crowd shouts.."The Lord he is God, the Lord he is God!" (you can read it all in 1 Kings 18 & 19, just before our reading for this morning) and so Elijah, who has shown the power of God and emerged triumphant, has all the false prophets dragged down into the valley, and killed. When Jezebel discovers what has happened, she sends Elijah a message that he too will be killed within a day....(very blood thirsty, these Old Testament stories sometimes...aren't they!) so Elijah runs away in fear of his life...into the wilderness...where an angel of God miraculously provides him with food and water and then he travels on for 40 days (you remember that Moses was 40 days up on the mountain...and Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness....so the number of days is significant). He eventually reaches Mount Sinai, where Moses had first received the Law from God. Elijah wants to die...he is alone and deeply depressed...we can't be sure really whether he intended to find God on the mountain, or whether perhaps he was trying to run away from God...he was certainly experiencing a crisis of faith, and his hiding in the cave shows that he just wanted to be alone. But God calls him out from his cave, and tells him to wait for instructions about how to continue with his work.... this is how the story we just read continues.....and through this we can be shown the way in which God reveals his presence.....or rather the ways in which God is said **not** to be present, because the text tells us that the Lord was NOT in the wind, NOR in the earthquake, NOR in the fire....but rather in the sound of sheer silence....(one translation-the New Jerusalem version said: *a light murmuring sound*...the RSV said '*a still small voice*' and the Good News version said: '*a gentle whisper*'). From this we can learn that we can find God in the quiet, ordinary, everyday events in our lives....not necessarily in the dramatic and noisy things...we can notice too, that wind and fire and earthquake could not move Elijah from his cave...but in the end it was the gentle quietness...the sheer silence...that drew him out. Perhaps there is a message for us in this....we, too, can respond to God in the quiet places of the heart....and if we are willing to make this kind of space for one another, there will be more opportunity of listening and being able to

hear the other person at a deeper level....a better chance of understanding one another. We live in such a noisy world....often the challenge for us is to be still, and listen to God's voice....and we need quiet for that. Sometimes the noise that prevents us listening for God's voice can be the voice that comes from within ourselves...the voice of our own pain, our own frustration, our mistrust of others and their motives...or sometimes, just plain busyness, which interferes with our ability to listen or make space for God's voice.

Now the connection between the first reading and the gospel is not immediately obvious...in fact they almost seem to point in different directions...because in the gospel it is in the middle of a huge gale that the disciples meet with Jesus. But the gospel does not say that the Lord was in the gale! In fact, the gale blew up when Jesus was not present, when the disciples were without him in the boat. When he finally steps into the boat, the wind drops, and all is calm...it is a time of silence, just as it was with Elijah. Jesus is always calm, and the source of all our calm. Just as the gentle breeze, like a whisper, drew Elijah out of the darkness of his hiding place, so the sight of Jesus walking on the waves drew Peter out from the boat, to be with him in that calm place. As soon as Peter stops looking at Jesus, and focuses on the wind and the waves, he begins to sink, and Jesus reaches out to catch him, and asks him '*why did you doubt?*' Drawing close to Jesus does indeed bring us peace, but in order to come close, we need to fix our gaze on him, place all our trust in him, and not look down at the stormy waters around us, those places of turmoil in our lives.

The boat in the gospel story has often been interpreted as being a symbol of the community of the Church...the early Christians for whom Matthew wrote, some 55 years after the Resurrection, were facing great difficulties. Many of the Jewish people who had been converted to Christianity were feeling cut off from their Jewish roots, and had been excluded from the synagogue...some were giving up their faith ...and experiencing doubt in the face of persecution. It must have often felt as if the strong wind and heavy sea would sink their boat.

The boat can also be a personal image for us...of our lives...your life, and my life. How is the boat of our life at this particular time, yours, and mine? Maybe it is rocking violently in the storm of life....and perhaps you are exhausted from trying to steady your boat, or from rowing against the tide and feeling as if you are getting nowhere...Maybe you have a calm sea at the moment...but I believe we all do have times when our lives become turbulent and unpredictable....when we feel we aren't quite coping as we would like to. We could be facing a financial storm, with all the anxiety that can bring...or a family disintegrating...misunderstandings and confusion? Sometimes a medical storm can engulf us and our family...unexpectedly. During these past few weeks there have been several members of our parish community who have been extremely ill, in hospital...it is frightening to be very ill, and we can feel so alone, and anxious. Jesus tells his disciples not to be afraid...he comes over the water to be with them...He does that for us too. Even when Peter's faith fails, just as ours often does, Jesus encourages him to trust, not fear. Then the storm ceases, and all the disciples acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God. We too can hold that promise of Jesus in our hearts and respond

to it in our prayers...today and this week...for ourselves and in our intercessions for others, who may be struggling with storms in their lives. There is great power in quiet and faithful prayer... because it is offered in trust to God.

Neither the prophet Elijah nor Peter had the faith enough to cope when life became too difficult for them.....but God supported both of them in the difficult tasks they were called upon to do. That promise is extended to all of us who put our trust in God, and in his Son, Jesus Christ. Sometimes it **does** seem as if we are very much alone...and even though we know that we won't be asked to walk across the water, it feels as if we are...and we get that awful sinking feeling...that panicky sense that we are not coping...but lets remember that we are never thrown back totally on our own resources. We live in a community of faith...we have God's word to guide us and we have the sacrament of the Eucharist to sustain us....and we have the support of one another. And as we share our ongoing vision for this Church, and look forward to where we believe God is calling us in the future, we know that as people of the Church of the Ascension we will need to look up, stop being afraid, and fix our eyes on Jesus, trusting in his power to save and help us in all the circumstances of our lives. **Amen.**