

1 KINGS 19:1-13
THE SOUND OF GENTLE QUIETNESS

Do you have a phobia that you're prepared to talk about in public? *People spoke about their fear of heights; a fear of looking down on running water; a fear of dentists, a fear of being underground in an enclosed space; a fear of spiders.* Some are quite trite and trivial when we talk about them, and people laugh, but they matter to us: Some of our fears are life-shaping: if we have a fear of the outside then some live like prisoners in their own home because they can't face crossing the threshold. With a fear of heights or ladders we don't visit high places, or a fear of water and the sea we don't go swimming! Triskaidekaphobia – do you know what this is? It is the fear of the number 13! There is a list of phobias and even a fear of phobias! You might have a quiet smile to yourself about some of these, especially if you don't suffer from them. Fears can shape the way in which we behave!

Do you suffer from the fear of failure? This can also be a hugely strong influence on us in lots of ways. Some of you play sport, tennis, golf, bowls. Indeed if you play any sport there are times when fear overtakes and the risk of failure becomes too strong and you play different shot. Tennis, for example: at match point against you, the winning shot is down the line, but you have missed three previous down-the-line shots, so you're not prepared to take the risk of missing again, so you play across court, the safer option. No matter what sport you play there will be times when the fear of failure shapes the way you play. The same attitude shapes life in general: when we're faced with choices, we take the safe option because the other is too risky and "What happens if we fail and it doesn't work out?" The fear of failure shapes the way we think and the choices we make and the way we behave. Churches are full of this fear at times: "we can't do that; it will never work!" gives voice to the fear of failure and so churches become risk-averse, conservative groups because the fear of failure is so strong in its leadership.

Last week, we told the story of Elijah and the contest on the top of Mount Carmel, the battle for the soul of the nation of Israel; *"how long..." (1 Kings 18:21)* That battle for the soul of Israel and who would be the God they worshipped was played out on the top of Mount Carmel; would Ba'al set the bull alight for his prophets or would the Lord set the bull alight in answer to Elijah's prayers? Ba'al did nothing and the Lord sent fire from heaven and answered Elijah's prayers in the most dramatic way and people said at the end *"The Lord..." (1 Kings 18:39)* Elijah had won the battle; the prophets of Ba'al were defeated and I suppose he might expect that everything would be different now in Israel; Elijah would be respected and loved; he would be the guide of the people and people from the king down would listen for the word of the Lord through the prophet Elijah. Success!

But it didn't work out that way. Jezebel has other ideas: *"The gods will get you for this and I'll get even with you! By this time tomorrow you'll be as dead as any one of those prophets."* (1 Kings 19:2 –*The Message*) She hasn't changed! She's still as evil as ever; she's still as anti-the Lord as ever she was; still as selfish and violent and wanting to get her own way and so she breathes out these murderous threats against Elijah. *"Elijah..." (1 Kings 19:3)* It's no surprise; it is the natural reaction to this threat; to run away; to escape; he is afraid of the queen with good reason; she has the will and she has the power to carry out her threats; these are no empty threats to happily ignore; there is real danger here for Elijah and so running away seems a good idea.

But there's more to Elijah's mood than fear of Jezebel. *"I have..." (1 Kings 19:10)* He has failed; his ministry has been for nothing. That's the way Elijah sees it. He has given

everything; he has worked his heart out for God; he has put his life on the line for God and for the sake of the people of Israel, but for nothing. Nothing has changed. The people are still rejecting God; the altars of the Lord are still broken down because nobody wants to use them; the church buildings are still shut because no-one wants to go there any more; the bibles are still gathering dust on the shelves because no-one wants to read them anymore; the promises that God has made are unheard because no-one wants to listen to sermons anymore and those who have tried to speak out have been silenced, some of them even killed. *"I am..." (1 Kings 19:10)* There is a deep sense of failure; his ministry has come to nothing; nothing has changed; no-one else wants to stand up for the Lord. There is this deep-seated fear in his heart that he has failed.

Elijah is downcast. His mood is bleak. Not surprisingly, his mood is created by his fears. He is afraid for his life because Jezebel wants to get even with him; his deepest fear is that he has given his heart and soul to something that hasn't worked! So he is down; his heart is heavy and that is understandable. There's something else going on here: Elijah is also tired out; he has given his heart and soul to the battle on Carmel; he is exhausted by the effort and energy he has put into this battle and it has taken its toll on him. Life always seems bleaker when we're tired; it was certainly true of Elijah. It shows in his mood; it shows in his prayers because he complains to God that nothing has worked; his prayer *"let me die"* reflects that mood. Graciously God listens and then answers these prayers, though not in the way Elijah asks.

"God answers his prayers" – what kind of expectation does that create in our minds? Does it create the expectation of some kind of great demonstration of God's power, a miraculous healing or the situation suddenly transformed from bad to good? There are two answers to Elijah's prayers, neither of them a great demonstration of power and in fact, both of them the exact opposite.

1. Sleep and food: he has run the whole length of the country, from north to south, and is now in the desert; mercifully God doesn't answer his prayer "let me die"! *"Then he..." (1 Kings 19:5f)* God's answer to Elijah's prayer is sleep and food. God sees what the prophet needs; He sees that Elijah is exhausted and so he needs to sleep and eat and these two very simple things are answer to his prayers; instead of letting him die, God rebuilds him, gives him new physical strength and energy knowing that when he is physically refreshed, his spiritual view on life will be more secure; he will be more willing to listen.

2. The Sound of gentle quietness: we're in Sinai, on Mount Horeb, a significant place; this is the place where God gave the ten commandments, setting out the way of faith and life for Israel; we're back there now with Elijah, the great prophet who is looking to encounter God all over again. *"I'm the only one left!"* Elijah is praying in the cave and *"the Lord..." (1 Kings 19:11)* What kind of expectation does this create in our minds; *"The Lord..." (1 Kings 19:11)* We're not disappointed at first because all of sudden a mighty wind blows up; surely the wind is a demonstration of the power and strength of God to help Elijah overwhelm his enemies, power and strength that we need for living life in difficult times! *"But the..." (1 Kings 19:11)* Ah, well; the next time it is an earthquake and another show of power, surely this is where we'll find God, in the great demonstrations of power and might and glory. *"But the..." (1 Kings 19:11)* Then, the fire! That is so often symbolic of God's presence: Moses met God in the bush that was burning, fire was symbolic of God's presence there and then; so surely it will be again! *"But the..." (1 Kings 19:12)* *"After the..." (1 Kings 19:12f)* Something in Elijah recognized the presence of God; his reaction tells us that; pulling his cloak about his face suggests that he knows he is in the presence of the Lord and to be humble. "The sound of gentle quietness" is

where he senses the presence of God. God has not gone away from Israel; there are 7000 others in Israel who will stand alongside Elijah; Elijah can be faithful in his ministry and faithfulness is all that God asks of him. God will be with him and will help him. Maybe there will be no more great demonstrations of power for the rest of Elijah's ministry, but he has work to do in the name of the Lord and the Lord will honour that work and Elisha will carry it into the next generation too. It took Elijah a little while to grasp all of this, but he did and he carried on, he remained faithful; God blessed Israel through him!

We live in turbulent times in the Church in Scotland at the moment! Perhaps we have never been more aware of the divisions within the Church than in the past few weeks. People on the outside are taking every opportunity to tell the world that the Church is dead, that Christianity is on the way out! The congregation's leadership are asking questions about the future and what we need to think about and do in order to be the church in the future and some of that is scary, taking risks; behind that is the fear that what we've been doing has somehow failed. There are the personal issues and difficulties that we're dealing with too. All of this creates a deep sense of fear that the Church in Scotland that we have loved and served for many years is somehow going to disappear. We pray and ask God to hear our prayers and to come to our rescue, to save the Church, to revive the Church, to revitalize the Church and make Scotland sit up and take notice of the gospel all over again. We pray and what kind of expectation does that create? That God will strike us with wind, earthquake and fire to make people sit up and take notice and come to faith all over again?

If Elijah tells us anything, he tells us that God doesn't work like that most of the time. The reality is that God hasn't gone away. God is still here, still amongst us, still with us; God still listens to our prayers and will answer us; there are still many thousands of people in Scotland who are in churches today to worship God because they believe the gospel and who pray for the kingdom to be built. God calls us to be faithful, to continue in faithful service to Jesus in our own small ways. It is in this way that His kingdom is built in Scotland; it always has been and it always will be. On Saturday at our Kirk Session conference the elders were asked to think about who were the people who influenced them most in their Christian faith. I didn't hear this discussion, but I know from times when we've asked that question before the answer has been: grandmother, mother, father, Sunday School teacher, school teacher, often a quiet influence to lead us to Jesus. They were then asked to think about the people on whom they were an influence today. The challenge for us is to remain faithful to God and not to be afraid. There will be a time to take risks, trusting God, not being afraid of failure, honouring the past, and seeing the future and looking to be the people of God in days to come.

Somehow the "sound of gentle quietness" is symbolic of God's presence. God is at work in the world in ways that we don't always see; God is at work in the Church, in the congregation, in the community, in us, in ways that we don't always see. God answers our prayers, but not always as we ask them. Who would have expected the salvation of world to begin in a stable and to be accomplished on a cross; yet that is Jesus. Because of Jesus, because we are people whom God loves greatly, we don't need to be afraid of anything; we certainly don't need to be afraid of failure. God is with us; He has not gone away; His love has not come to an end; His Spirit is still at work. Elijah discovered that at the mouth of a cave on Mount Horeb when, in the sound of gentle quietness, he encountered God. Listen for God's word today! Take heart and do not be afraid!