

1 KINGS 19:3-13a  
WALKING WITH GOD!

The 2011 census tells us that 40% of the people who live in our neighbourhood have no religion. How do you feel about that? We look back to days, and hear stories about days when people queued around the block on Sunday evenings to get into church; we look back to the days when these buildings were full. How do we react when people disregard the faith we hold dear? Closer to home, many of us have family members who have no interest in the Christian faith or in Church: how do we react to that? How do we react to them? We remember days, perhaps, when they were part of the church family, as children in Sunday School, but now they have gone away. For church leaders, something of the picture of empty pews creates a sense of "we have failed! There must have been something we could have done better!" because now the church is weaker, more marginalised. The same seems true on the personal level perhaps with our families or friends. That sense of failure is hard to shake off; it gets into our soul!

Elijah is a fascinating Bible character. He is such an unpredictable character and charismatic; I think that's what I like about him. He appears from nowhere; then everywhere he goes, he is a man on a mission, not afraid to stand up to the powers-that-be and make his voice heard for God. His big moment came on Mount Carmel, with the battle for the soul of Israel, his people, God's people. The question at the heart of that battle was this: "*How long...*" (1 Kings 18:21) There were two opinions, two religious views: "is God the Lord? Then follow Him. Is Baal the Lord? Then follow him". Elijah wants people to choose to love and worship God; he is a man on a mission. A great contest follows on the top of Mount Carmel; "let's decide, once and for all, who is Lord" So they have this contest to set fire to a sacrifice: there are two bulls and Elijah has one and the 400 prophets of Baal have the other. Who can set their bull alight? The prophets of Baal go first and pray to their gods to send fire, but nothing happens and Elijah begins to make fun of them; "maybe your god is on holiday!" Then it is his turn, and he douses his bull in gallons and gallons of water; who can set fire to a soggy, wet bull? Elijah prays and God sends fire and answers Elijah's prayers and no one is left in any doubt as to the winner of the contest.

So Elijah will be a national hero and everyone will love him and the people will now all love and worship God. Yes? Well, no! Elijah wakes up the next day to find a message from the queen: "You are a dead man!" Far from being a resounding success, the whole thing seems to have flopped; he has failed in his revival mission. He runs away! Carmel is in the North, Beersheba is in the South; he runs the whole length of the country, John O'Groats to Lands End, and then even further, and this is not a charity run; this is a man running for fear of his life. We're going to look at Elijah's spirit, what is going on in his heart and his head; we're going to see what God does for him; in all of this, we'll discover that the future is in God's hands.

How does Elijah feel? "*He came...*" (1 Kings 19:4) "*I have...*" (1 Kings 19:10) Elijah is depressed; that is not a clinical diagnosis, but he is down; he uses strong words to express his deep desires; that depression comes from his sense of failure. "I've had enough; all of this mission You've given me to do, Lord, hasn't worked; I'm the only one left and no-one has responded to my ministry; all I'm getting are death threats from the queen! Maybe it is just as well, if I die. It has been all to no avail; it has been pointless!" As far as Elijah can see, it has all been a bit of a train crash of a mission and ministry; it's all come crashing down about his ears and he carries away this deep sense of failure; nothing has worked and nobody has been converted. The great moment on Mount Carmel when the bull was set alight by fire from heaven has all been forgotten and life is bleak!

These are uncomfortable words. We squirm when we're in a conversation and someone starts talking like this. But this is part of our human psyche. Lots of church leaders look at these census statistics and see Scotland drifting away from the Christian faith in a great rush and what we see engenders a deep sense of failure; we must have done something wrong; we must have missed a trick somewhere. We're told about the 1950's, the days when church membership in Scotland was at its peak, the days of Billy Graham, and it all seems such a distant memory. Local church leaders look at congregations getting older and older and there fewer and fewer children in church, or young adults, or family groups; how do you feel? Few people are unaffected by that; we have a sense of regret about it and even a sense of failure; this is our fault; we are responsible and we carry that burden around. Parents look at the children they brought up in the Christian faith, but then later these same children as adults vote to walk away from the Church and even from the faith and that hurts.

What does God do with Elijah? Three things: first, He deals with Elijah's exhaustion; then He speaks gently to him; and thirdly He shows him a better future.

Things are bleaker emotionally when you are physically exhausted. That insight into Elijah comes from the way in which God deals with the prophet. He has just said: "*I have...*" (1 Kings 19:4) and what does God do? Send him for counselling? No! Sleep and eat! Sleep and eat! "*He lay...*" (1 Kings 19:5f) "Sleep and eat" begins to restore Elijah and then there is food for his journey; he has further to go, so there is food for his journey. Elijah is physically restored before God does anything else. Our view of the world, of life, of faith is bleaker when we are physically exhausted. We see people who are dealing with difficult situations in life and their view of these situations is bleak and hopeless and they can't cope with them; and they've not slept properly for weeks. It is not the whole answer to big issues, but our view of the world is different when we're physically exhausted; the world is a brighter place when we're rested and physically feel better. God deals with Elijah's exhaustion; "eat and sleep".

Then God speaks to Elijah: we've spoken already about the way in which God spoke to Elijah and it was not in the wind, or the earthquake, or the fire; but God speaks in "the sound of gentle quietness, of gentle silence". I think there is huge symbolism in the way by which God speaks to a prophet whose spirit is tender and bruised. He doesn't speak in loud noises, but in quietness, the whisper, silence. God is not shouting at Elijah; God is not telling Elijah "don't be daft"; God is not giving him a telling off; God is telling a man who is bruised and battered "I am here; I am with you!" The parent whose child is crying in the middle of the night, goes to deal with the situation; that parent doesn't usually give the child a telling off - "stop crying or else..."; the parent says to the child "hush now; mummy's here; daddy's here!" The sound of the quiet voice of the parent more often than not is enough, eventually, to soothe and quieten the child. God has not gone away; God is with us always and everywhere; God is there in all circumstances of our lives; God speaks to reassure and to love us, quietly, with love and compassion.

Then God shows Elijah the future. The prophet has said that he's the only believer left; no-one else loves the Lord. Now, God is able to show Elijah a better future: the future is about anointing two new kings who will do some important things for the people; the future is about anointing Elisha who will be the next prophet in line after Elijah has gone, carrying on the mission; the future is about "*I reserve...*" (1 Kings 19:18), 7000 believers who were hidden away for fear of the queen? God's shows Elijah a different future than the one he had thought possible; he is shown a new future in which there are people of faith who will continue to fly the flag, a new future

where people will still love the Lord and walk in His ways. Elijah's faith is renewed; his depression is taken away and he sees that God is still living and active in the world and he trusts God. The future has a church; even in Scotland the future has a Church; it will look different from the way the church looks today, but there will be a church. We are called to use our imagination to see what that future might look like and what we need to do now to make that future possible. Elijah had things to do to open doors for the future; we have things to do to open doors for the future church in our place. Our task is to find out what these things are; a soft play space as a way of making it easier for parents and young children? Making buildings fit for purpose? Holding café conversations in the deli? What else? What does the future look like?

There is a deep change in Elijah through this story. It begins with him in the depths of despair; he has failed and nobody else believes; when he dies, the light will go out. But God cares for him: sleep and eat; "I am here Elijah"; there is a new prophet and 7000 others who love the Lord! By the end, Elijah's spirit is revived and he trusts the Lord; he will walk in the ways of the Lord and the mission goes on. The future is God's. God is already at work in the church to cultivate a new future. For our lives, the future is God's. See your children, who once walked away from the Christian faith, and they show a sign that there's still something there; pray on for your children and grandchildren. Pray for the people in our neighbourhood who seem to have turned their backs on faith. Pray for people in other generations who find it hard to make connections with the Christian faith and with the church and ask yourself "what can I do to make things easier for them? What bridges can I build for them?" This is a new way of thinking. The Church is no longer the centre of our community's view of itself; the church is no longer the centre of the culture of Scotland. This demands from us a new way of thinking, with the church doing the mission of God in the world; how can we make that happen? The future means questions, uncertainties; if we take away one thing take this: the future is God's, we are in His hands, His loving, caring, always there hands!

Here's food for your journey: Jesus talks about Himself as the bread of life, the One who supplies us with everything we need, who is sufficient for all our circumstances. "*I am...*" (*John 6:51*) Jesus brings the whole blessing of God into our lives. He brings forgiveness for our sense of failure; grace to know that we are loved; strength to help us when we're weak; peace of mind to overcome our fears and anxieties; hope when everything is bleak and black; love when everyone else seems to have gone away and left us. The future is God's and here is food for our journey: Jesus Himself. Learn to trust Him and walk in His ways; learn to be the people that God wants us to be, people of good heart and sound character, people who love the Lord and love others, people who walk with God and who know that God walks with us. God cared for Elijah – "eat and sleep"; God reassured Elijah - "I am with you"; God showed Elijah a new future. Elijah changed: he found hope and faith again; he found reassurance and peace. God's future is coming towards us: personally, in church, even in the world; embrace it, trust God and be the person God wants you to be.