

Elijah and the Voice of God

Mendelsohn was one of those musical prodigies like Mozart. While in his teens ne had composed some of his most popular works; the Midsummer's Night Dream music which later included the Wedding March still played at weddings today, his beautiful Octet and many other precocious works. He wrote some fine works for the organ which we often hear at St George's. Mendelsohn was responsible for rediscovering Bach's works and performing them. He was much beloved by Queen Victoria. Sadly he died at the early age of 38.

Two years before he died, Mendelsohn composed the oratorio Elijah which is still regularly performed. One of the choruses is on the text 'And after the earthquake there came a fire : but yet the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire there came a still small voice: and in that still small voice onward came the Lord.'

That text gives me my theme for this morning I want to talk about the **Voice of God. Have you ever heard the **Voice of God**? Well, listen and you might hear it.**

Two people who heard the **Voice of God were Elijah and Jesus as we have just heard in the readings. Elijah was**

frequently accompanied by thunder and lightning, fire and whirlwinds, but he was no villain but on the side of God and the angels. Elijah does not have a book named after him, like Isaiah or Jeremiah, but he is in fact one of the most significant figures in the Hebrew Scriptures. Do you remember the question put to John the Baptist? ‘Are you Elijah or the Prophet?’ Not Moses or Abraham, Isaiah or Ezekiel, but Elijah. Why? Because of the last few verses in the book of Malachi, in fact almost the last words in the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures. ‘Look, I shall send you Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.’ As a result, the Jews confidently expected Elijah to reappear before the advent of the Messiah. So it is not surprising that the people genuinely wondered whether John the Baptist was Elijah returned and the beginning of the last days. For there were similarities. Both John and Elijah were pursued by evil women, John by Herodias and Elijah by Jezebel. Both had a dramatic, bleak loss of faith: Elijah under the juniper tree and in the cave and John in prison when he sends to Jesus to ask ‘Are you the one who shall come?’ Both spent long periods of their lives alone in the solitude of the desert.

But when Jesus went up to the mountain just before his coming death in the event we call the Transfiguration, which is recorded in this morning’s Gospel, to whom does he talk about his

crucifixion? To Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets. Not to John the Baptist the last prophet nor Isaiah nor David whose psalms and prophecies sang of Christ but Elijah.

John the Baptist denounced King Herod and Elijah denounced King Ahab. Ahab had set up temples to Baal, the heathen Baal, the bull god in the North and the South of the kingdom, he had married Jezebel, a heathen who encouraged him to follow her religion and hunted the followers and priests of the Jewish God until there were only 7,000 who had not gone over to worship Baal.

This was Elijah's dark hour. All Israel seemed lost and he was pursued for his life. Elijah in his despair heard the **Voice of God telling him to go to Ahab and say 'I swear by the life of the Lord, the God of Israel, whose servant I am, that there will be neither dew nor rain these coming years unless I give the word. So said the Lord to Elijah when all seemed lost; the **Voice of God**.**

So Elijah moved on to his great triumph, the trial with the priests of Baal. It is one of the most dramatic and entertaining episodes in the Hebrew Scriptures. Two bulls were chosen, each prepared for sacrifice and the wood gathered under each. The priests of Baal then called to Baal to send down fire. They tried

and they tried, they huffed and they puffed, but nothing happened. Then said Elijah, with biting irony (who says there is no humour in the Bible?) ‘Call louder, for Baal is a god. Maybe he is deep in thought or engaged or gone on a journey; or maybe gone to sleep and needs to be wakened. Call louder’. But it was to no avail.

Then Elijah said to God ‘Answer me’ and the fire descended and consumed the offering. Then Elijah’s servant looked towards the West and told him ‘I see a cloud no bigger than a man’s hand coming up from the West’. And the drought broke and the rain came.

But in the hour of his triumph, Elijah was pursued by Jezebel and fled for his life. And in a mood of depression after the excitement of his triumph over the priests of Baal, he sits down under a juniper tree and says to God ‘It is enough. Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my father.’ And it is now that God speaks to him in his despair as Elijah lodges in a dark dismal cave. Not for this man of fire, thunder and lightning, did God speak in a storm rending the mountain, for the Lord was not in the wind; not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but in a still small voice or in the sound of silence. The **Voice of God.**

So Elijah moves on to fresh triumphs and he begins to prepare Elisha to succeed him, Eventually the time comes for Elijah to leave as we heard in the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning. He seems very reluctant to leave and leads Elisha on a tour of the major centres of Judah, constantly trying to persuade Elisha to leave him. But Elisha won't leave his master and at Bethel he realises that this is the end; Elijah is going to be taken from him. But still Elisha stays with Elijah who tells him that the **Voice of God** has told him to go to Jericho. Once more the loyal Elisha goes with him and at Jericho the **Voice of God** tells Elijah to go to the river Jordan and this time not only the faithful Elisha but also fifty of the company of prophets go with him. Elijah rolls up his robe, strikes the river and a path is opened so that the pair may cross on dry land. Elisha makes a prayer to inherit a double portion of his master's spirit. As the two walked together Elijah separated from him and, in character, is swept up to heaven in a chariot with horses of fire in a whirlwind.

But let's have another look at the two people in our readings, Elijah and Jesus. Both are at a moment of crisis; Elijah reluctantly waiting for the **Voice of God** to tell him where to go and Jesus waiting for the event we call the Transfiguration.

Each had faith in God. Elijah; ‘The Lord whose servant I am’ and Jesus in his recognition of his coming death. Both in that moment of crisis heard the **Voice of God**, not in a dramatic storm or wind as did St Paul whose life was changed when he heard the **Voice of God**.

Jesus takes only three of his disciples with him to the mountain top; Peter, James and John. There they see this event we call the Transfiguration, in the Greek *metamorphosis*, to change one’s form. The disciples see Jesus in the final state of lordship and glory to which he will eventually be exalted. It is a vision of the end of the epoch emphasised by the presence of Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets who would appear at the end of the world and whose presence testifies that Jesus is their successor, the true Christ

Jesus is clothed in dazzling white as the angels will be at his tomb, and the disciples have little doubt that it is this glorious form he will possess after he is taken up to heaven. And from the cloud the **Voice of God** says ‘This is my son, my chosen. Listen to him.’

We are not likely to hear the **Voice of God** in that way. We have been conditioned by the very word ‘conversion’ to

believe that God speaks to us in blinding flashes of light, in thunder and earth shattering explosions . To most of us, he doesn't; that is the role of villains like Mephistopheles and Satan. God speaks to us in the still small voice in which Elijah found the voice of God. It is the calm when the wind ceases and we realise that the words 'O you of little faith, why did you doubt?' apply to us.

It is the voice that speaks to us in the actions of our neighbours, the kindness in despair, the help and the sympathy, a beacon in the ocean of life.

'Ships that pass in the night and speak to each other in passing.

Only a signal shown and a distant voice in the
darkness.

So in the ocean of life we pass and speak one another.

Only a look and a voice; then darkness again and a silence.'

(Longfellow, Tales of a Wayside

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We all get disillusioned and depressed, we go through periods of despair ,we all have moments of doubt and lack of

faith. We are all potential Elijah's cut off from the **Voice of God. At times, like these we tend to concentrate on our failures and wonder whether God had deserted us. But he hasn't and his voice is there waiting for us to hear.**

But don't expect that when you pray you will hear a heavenly voice in your ears. Don't listen for the bells like St Joan, because the chances are that you won't hear them. But if you sit still like Elijah and wait for the wind and the fire and the earthquake to pass by, if like him you are the servant of God or like Jesus you have utter faith in God , then you will at times hear the still small **Voice of God.**

Only a signal shown and a distant voice in the darkness.

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